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# How History Matters to Philosophy

Reconsidering Philosophy's  
Past After Positivism

Robert C. Scharff





# How History Matters to Philosophy

In recent decades, widespread rejection of positivism's notorious hostility toward the philosophical tradition has led to renewed debate about the real relationship of philosophy to its history. *How History Matters to Philosophy* takes a fresh look at this debate. Current discussion usually starts with the question of whether philosophy's past *should* matter, but Scharff argues that the very existence of the debate itself demonstrates that it already *does* matter. After an introductory review of the recent literature, he develops his case in two parts. In Part I, he shows how history actually matters even for Plato's Socrates, Descartes, and Comte, in spite of their apparent promotion of conspicuously ahistorical Platonic, Cartesian, and Positivistic ideals. In Part II, Scharff argues that the real issue is not whether history matters; rather it is that we already have a history, a very distinctive and unavoidable inheritance, which paradoxically teaches us that history's mattering is merely optional. Through interpretations of Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, he describes what thinking in a historically determinate way actually involves, and he considers how to avoid the denial of this condition that our own philosophical inheritance still seems to expect of us. In a brief conclusion, Scharff explains how this book should be read as part of his own effort to acknowledge this condition rather than deny it.

**Robert C. Scharff** is Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of New Hampshire, USA, author of *Comte After Positivism*, and former Editor of *Continental Philosophy Review*.



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# **How History Matters to Philosophy**

Reconsidering Philosophy's  
Past After Positivism

**By Robert C. Scharff**



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# Preface

Two facts of intellectual life seem uncomfortably inseparable. Everyone thinks within a concrete, socio-historical situation, but claims about what is true—and least about important things—are supposed to be universal and situation-free. The usual philosophical approach to this problem is to demand that aspiring truth-seekers liberate themselves from their histories. In a slogan, history (and an individual thinker's place in it) is one thing; truth (and the universal means of obtaining it) is another; and in philosophy, as in science, only the latter counts. This traditional ideal, however, has never been without its skeptics, and in the past few decades it has become the target of serious debate. This book takes a fresh look at this debate.

Any criticism of the traditional ideal must start by squarely facing its apparent obviousness. Why would anyone think that when we search for real knowledge, the facts of one's personal or cultural past should even matter? Truths may of course be *about* what is universal or what is local, but in either case isn't the *truth* about them what is found by those who overcome the parochial limitations of particular viewpoints and initial assumptions? Sixty years ago, most English-language philosophers would probably have regarded these questions as rhetorical. A favorite quip at the time is attributed to W.V. Quine, who allegedly said that two different kinds of people call themselves philosophers, those interested in philosophy and those interested in the history of philosophy. Behind this quip lies the belief that philosophy belongs to the same intellectual family as natural science. For real philosophers, so goes the argument, the history of philosophy is as irrelevant to current practice as the history of science is for today's scientists. Everyone knows that history belongs to the humanities; and in the humanities, the primary topic is not the quest for truth but what people have thought about the quest for truth. Philosophers, like scientists, must conduct their inquiries in a neutral or "objective" manner, without reference to the particular conditions of the participants. Indeed, in the 1950s, the world itself seemed to confirm that this is the only acceptable approach. C.P. Snow may have complained that a rigid distinction between science and the humanities was strangling the culture, but the need for this distinction seemed pressed upon us as much by Sputnik as by positivist epistemology.



But that was sixty years ago. By the 1970s, the heyday of positivism and logical empiricism seemed to be over. Advocates of anti-historical, “scientific philosophy” were becoming rare, and most philosophers had begun to take the question of the relation between real philosophy and the history of philosophy quite seriously. Of course, there had always been a substantial minority—including unrepentant historians of philosophy and many continental philosophers—that had never been sympathetic to the traditional dichotomy of philosophy/history and were certainly opposed to its narrowly scientific interpretation. Unlike analytic philosophers, who make up the Anglo-American mainstream, continental philosophers have always tended to see knowledge of philosophy’s tradition as essential to current philosophical practice. In fact, they typically develop their own views through dialogue with traditional thinkers. Yet the continental approach is not a solution to the history problem; it simply faces the same problem in reverse. As analytic philosophers move away from the ahistorical position of positivism, they must ask how philosophy’s history *should figure* in present practice. Continental philosophers, starting from the assumption that current philosophy is in fact inseparable from its tradition, must ask in what sense they do *something other than* repeat their inheritance.

In this book, I do not directly address the contentious issue of analytic versus continental philosophy. For my purposes, the issue is only tangentially relevant. My main purpose is to focus on a neglected aspect of the problem. To state my thesis quickly, it is now one (relatively uncontroversial) thing to say that no philosophy is ever really ahistorical and to expose unacknowledged signs of historical context and circumstances in the philosophies of *others*. It is another (hotly contested) thing entirely to say that history is—inevitably and without choice—important to and in one’s own philosophical practice, not just in the practice of others.

I consider the issue in eight chapters consisting of an introduction (Chapter 1) and two main parts. The Introduction considers some preliminaries concerning the term, “history,” and then surveys the recent literature on the contemporary relevance of philosophy’s history. “History,” at least in relation to human beings, has three main meanings. First, it can simply refer to “the past.” In this sense, human history is what is over and done with—an optional object or topic for philosophers, historians, and social scientists. Some choose to study it, some not, and some might use their knowledge of past practices to enrich their own, some not. Second, it can refer specifically to the science or discipline that decides to study the past (e.g., literary history, history of warfare, ancient history)—again, something optional. But there is third sense in which history is not optional. Philosophers, like all human beings, inherit the past. In the form of “my [or our] history,” it functions as a living legacy of background understanding that gives us our initial take on what it all means. Like it or not, this history precedes and informs every effort to philosophize, or for that matter, to think or do anything. But



how does it do so? The main point of my Introduction is to set this question up for the rest of the book.

In one respect, this third sense of history as a living legacy—the water in which we fishes find ourselves presently swimming—is not a problem at all but a fact. It just is the case that philosophy, like any human practice, takes place in culture-specific space. By the time we begin to do anything more than sleep and eat, we already have a native language, a social-political heritage, a starting point thick with a collective sense of what matters and how to approach it. My point, however, is not that we have all this already, but that we have it unreflectively. Philosophy, says Kant, revolves around three questions. What can I know? What should I do? And what can I hope for? Yet in the life of any actual philosopher, these questions are never so abstract. We pursue them in some variation of the form they are handed down, or “given” to us. Today, for example, we ask about knowledge in many ways, but we cannot decide, as Socrates did, to ignore questions about the material world and concentrate instead on questions about the good life. And here things start to get problematic. Apparently, “who we already are” provides us with a specific sense of the appropriate way to pursue philosophical questions, no matter how hard we try to ask them just in general. Indeed, even the idea that philosophical questions should be pursued “in general”—together with the problems and the appeal of the idea—is itself a part of our inheritance. Even the manner in which the three meanings of “history” are now typically conceived expresses a postpositivist historicity, not merely a cultural universal. Hence, it is the third meaning of “history”—*as* a third meaning, and *in* its way of “historicizing” our philosophical outlook before we even discover that it is something to ask about—on which I concentrate.

In the rest of the Introduction, I review recent literature to show that even if renewed respect for philosophy’s history is everywhere evident, recognizing the contextualized character of philosophical practice is still a move used mainly as a weapon against predecessors and contemporary opponents. Much has been made, for example, of the fact that being anti-positivist does not guarantee a postpositivist outlook. Too often, notes Hilary Putnam, we hear that there is no God’s-eye viewpoint, expressed as if from a God’s-eye viewpoint. Some philosophers make this a central theme (e.g., Putnam, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Ian Hacking, Joseph Margolis, Alasdair MacIntyre) and argue that the inescapably contextualized condition of thinking is never more obvious than when it is denied. Some go on to admit that it is much harder to address the fact that being-situated is “my” condition, not just the condition of those one is criticizing for not facing it. Many still hope this fact need not make any real philosophical difference—that, for example, we can still at least aspire to perfectly decontextualized truth. Others like Rorty, MacIntyre, and Taylor argue that it makes all the difference. We must acknowledge, says Taylor, that human



life “runs a whole gamut of articulateness,” and that the old dream of Total Articulation is over. But so far, we have only scattered and unsatisfactory accounts of what philosophers should do instead, once it is admitted that the “inarticulate end of this gamut” always remains “primary.” In the rest of the book, I present a way to go forward from Taylor’s observation.

In Part I, I clarify the sense in which history *just does* matter to philosophy by discussing three philosophers (i.e., Socrates, Descartes, and Comte) who are often and famously thought to have demonstrated that it does not. There is, of course, an enormous body of scholarship on these figures. My purpose is not to compete with it, but to interpret its results in a way I have already used in an earlier book, *Comte after Positivism*, but develop more fully here. For each philosopher, I identify a tension between his stated extra-historical goal and all the evidence in his work that shows not only that but how he falls short of this goal. Chapter 2 starts from a supposed Socratic paradox: Here is a virtuous man who searches for the wisdom necessary for virtuous action . . . and yet admits this wisdom is actually available only to the gods. Chapter 3 begins with the Descartes who promotes a mathematical method of inquiry that promises absolutely certain knowledge of nature . . . but admits that his method does not apply in religion, morality, or politics, and then reports that he inevitably falls short of his stated aim even where his method applies. Chapter 4 considers Comte, the original positivist, who claims that intellectual history comes to an end when science replaces theology and metaphysics . . . and yet also thinks it is necessary to give an old-fashioned, non-scientific, historical defense of this claim.

In each case, I argue that this tension between a projected philosophical ideal and the actual, more limited accomplishment—that is, between Platonism and Socratic inquiry, Cartesianism and Descartes’ own meditation, and Positivism and Comte’s view of its needing a defense—shows how history does in fact matter in their philosophical practice. Yet instead of stressing their failure to achieve their projected goals, I ask what their actual practice shows us about how to think (albeit critically) *from within* one’s inheritance instead of against it and with an eye to escaping it. What becomes of Socratic dialogue, if knowing the Ideas is not its goal? Of mathematical thinking about nature, if no pure *ego cogitos* look for absolute certainty? Of scientific practice, if scientists are no longer presumed to have decontextualized, generic minds? The fact that history does matter, even for those who allegedly dreamed of achieving a position where it does not, sets up the question for Part II. “How” would philosophical practice change if it were explicitly recognized that history always just does already matter in it?

Chapter 5 considers Dilthey, whose fame as an advocate of “human” rather than natural science has unfortunately overshadowed his ultimately more important and pioneering ideas about what the appropriate pan-epistemological stance is for philosophers of any science, human or natural. Dilthey calls this stance “the standpoint of life,” and early on he defends it as the human scientific equivalent of the observational standpoint in natural



science; but in his late period, he reworks his idea of this standpoint and turns it into something more like the proper outlook for philosophy itself. The implication is that philosophers, like human scientists, should interpret all human practices “in their own terms” by reflecting first on one’s own understanding of how it is to be-historical. Chapter 6 analyzes Nietzsche’s famous concept of our past (*Geschichte*) as an inherited “burden” that inescapably places demands on our ideas about how to live and requires that we learn how to take advantage of historical knowledge (*Historie*) “for life” instead of just pursue it for intellectual satisfaction and instrumental gain. I argue that his descriptions of the burdensomeness of historical existence illuminate well the oppressively positivistic circumstances under which Dilthey tries to develop his notion of life’s standpoint. In the last two chapters, I show that between 1919 and 1927, Heidegger jointly rethinks Dilthey’s idea of life’s standpoint and Nietzsche’s conception of taking advantage of historical science for life, so that in *Being and Time*, he is able to arrive at a concept of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) that reinforces and positively recasts the still fundamentally epistemic and anti-metaphysical conclusions of these two earlier thinkers by focusing on the idea of experienced temporality that seems to silently inform their projects.

I conclude that Heidegger’s conception of the historically contextualized character of all thinking is directly relevant to the current debates about history versus current philosophical practice. The old dichotomy of science versus the humanities, where the royal road to the truth about reality is peeled off from the mere stories about previous seekers of such truth, seems wholly inappropriate in an age of ever more collaborative and interdisciplinary scientific practice and technological planning in an ever less avoidably multicultural setting. Yet letting go of the old ideas of absolute truth and contextless thinking does mean leaving tradition and common sense as we find them; rather, it calls only for greater candor about the historical determinateness of any current thinking, no matter how original, persuasive, scientific, or universally applicable “we” may regard it.

Finally, it should go without saying that this book is part of my own attempt to take its thesis seriously.

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## WORKS ON SOCRATES

VSS: Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*.

VSI: Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*.

VPS: Vlastos, “The Paradox of Socrates,” in *The Philosophy of Socrates*.

## DESCARTES’ WORKS AND WORKS ON DESCARTES

### Descartes

AT: Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols., new rev. ed. (*The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 3 vols. is not separately cited since AT pagination is in the margins).

On Descartes:

EDM: *Essays on Descartes’ ‘Meditations,’* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty.

PPE: Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*

## COMTE’S WORKS AND WORKS ON COMTE

### Comte

CPP: *Cours de philosophie positive*, 6 vols. (Bachelier, 1830–42). No complete English translation of the *Cours* exists; subsequent French editions all have various pagination; and no edition correlates its pagination with any others. My citations are by volume, lesson, and page number, to the first edition. References to available English translations (when reliable, sometimes modified) are, in order of preference, Frederick Ferre [F], *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*; Stanislaw Andreski [A], *The Essential Comte*; and Gertrud Lenzer [L], *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*. Lenzer’s selections from the *Cours*, themselves abridged, are from Harriet Martineau’s [M] “authorized” but very “freely translated and condensed,” *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 2 vols.

DEP: *Discours [preliminaire] sur l’esprit positif*, published separately and as an introduction (same pagination) to *Traitephilosophique d’astronomie populaire* [A Discourse on the Positive Spirit].

SPP: *Système de politique positive, ou traité de sociologie, instituant la religion de l’humanité*, 4 vols. [System of Positive Polity, 4 vols. Six “early essays on

social philosophy” reprinted as an “Appendice general” to SPP4 and here cited “SPP4a” to accommodate the separate French pagination (English pagination is continuous)].

## On Comte

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PIC 1, 2, and 3: Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, 3 vols.

## DILTHEY’S WORKS

GS: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 26 vols.

## English translations cited

[GS 1, 19, and 20] *Selected Works*, Vol. 1: *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1989).

[GS 5] *Selected Works*, Vol. 2: *Understanding the Human World* (2010).

[GS 7] *Selected Works*, Vol. 3: *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (2002).

[GS 6 and 26] *Selected Works*, Vol. 5: *Poetry and Experience* (1985).

## NIETZSCHE’S WORKS

KSA: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe im 15 Bänden*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari.

BT: *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Essays* (Cambridge).

EH: *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge).

HAH: *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge).

UM, UM2: “Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen I–IV,” 157–510, and “Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben,” 243–334, in *Sämtliche Werke* (UM2, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations* [Cambridge], 85–167).

## HEIDEGGER’S WORKS AND WORKS ON HEIDEGGER

### Heidegger

GA: *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols. (Available English cited with only significant alterations noted.)

CT [GA 64]: Reconstructed 1924 Marburg lecture, “The Concept of Time,” 107–25. (Bilingual edition, *The Concept of Time* [Blackwell]).

DD [GA 64]: *The Concept of Time* (the “Dilthey Draft”) (Continuum), 3–103.



- KL [Kassel Lectures, 1925; GA 80, forthcoming]: “Wilhelm Diltheys Forschungsarbeit und der gegenwärtige Kampf um eine historische Weltanschauung: 10 Vorträge,” *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 8: 143–79 (“Wilhelm Dilthey’s Research and the Struggle for a Historical Worldview,” in *Supplements*, 147–76).
- KNS [War Emergency Semester (*Kriegsnotsemester*) 1919]: “The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview,” GA 56/57:3–117/3–99. Otherwise Heidegger’s lecture courses cited SS (Summer Semester), WS (Winter Semester).
- PIA [GA 62:345–75]: “Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle: An Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation” (1922), in *Supplements*, 111–45. [Also, with commentary, in BH, 150–84.]
- SZ: [GA 2] *Sein und Zeit*, 10th ed. (Niemeyer, 1963) (*Being and Time* [Harper and Row] generally used, but Stambaugh’s translation [rev. ed., 2010] has been consulted. English pagination omitted; both translations contain the German pagination, as does GA 2. The latter is cited [along with S] for Heidegger’s later notes, added to his copy of SZ).

## Other English Translations Cited

- [GA 5] *Off the Beaten Track* (2002).
- [GA 9] *Pathmarks* (1998).
- [GA 12] *On the Way to Language* (1971).
- [GA 14, Part I] *On Time and Being* (1972).
- [GA 20] *History and the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (1985).
- [GA 22] *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy* (2008).
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- [GA 58] *Basic Problems of Phenomenology: Winter Semester 1919/1920* (2013).
- [GA 59] *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* (2010).
- [GA 60] *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (2004).
- [GA 61] *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research* (2001).
- [GA 63] *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1999).
- [GA 64] *The Concept of Time: The First Draft of ‘Being and Time’* (2011).

## On Heidegger

- BH: Theodore Kisiel and Thomas Sheehan, eds. *Becoming Heidegger*.
- GHBT: Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time.’*

## OTHER WORKS

- HPPT: Margaret Wilson, “History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of Sensible Qualities,” *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 191–243 (Reprinted in *Ideas and Mechanism*, 455–94. Both paginations given.)
- PIH: Richard Rorty, et al., eds., *Philosophy in History*.
- PoP: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012).
- PRS Edmund Husserl, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science [the “Logos article”],” in *Husserl: Shorter Works* (1981), 166–97.

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# 1 Thinking from Nowhere

## A Way of “Being” Historical

Twentieth-century positivists, as is well known, were the Henry Fords of philosophy. To them, as to him, history is bunk. One might have hoped that this movement, like so many religions, would die with its founders, but in fact its spirit still lingers. To be sure, overt hostility toward philosophy’s history and the need to study it, so widespread through the middle of the last century, has largely disappeared. We no longer hear the argument that history is just as irrelevant to good philosophy as it is to good physics.<sup>1</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to assume that we now live in an entirely postpositivist era. For one thing, the history of philosophy, compared to “doing” philosophy, still has no better than second-class status and still tends to be regarded as something best treated at arm’s length, if at all. For another, it still seems true to say that in Anglo-American circles, studying philosophy’s past is understood as optional, and even if the option is chosen, one must always remember that “the history of philosophy has to fit in with a body of work in the rest of the subject that is not historical, . . . not the other way round.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover and more seriously, this partial thaw in the anti-historical stance of positivism has certainly not inspired many converts to the Nietzschean view, cited in the Preface, that even if the *study* of history is optional, *being* historical is not. When Nietzsche says we exist as an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one, that we always “arrive” in the present as having-being, and that we just *are* historical, he means to be giving philosophers a necessary reflective assignment, not suggesting an interesting diversion.<sup>3</sup> Yet even the most outspoken postpositivists like Rorty and Taylor do not renew their acquaintance with philosophy’s history primarily because they care about the historical determinateness of their *own* thinking. Typically, the motive is either a straightforward interest in doing historical scholarship, or a desire to prove that one knows about one’s positivist predecessors and has rejected them.

In this opening chapter, I want to argue that analytic philosophers are often still decidedly unhistorical about their own philosophizing and, at best, tend to admit only the historically determinate character of everyone else’s thinking. What Putnam says of Rorty applies to many others: today,



## 2 *How History Matters to Philosophy*

he says, we often hear that there is no God's-eye viewpoint . . . from a God's-eye viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> The point of my argument will be that the idea of being an unhistorical or extra-historical thinker is in fact oxymoronic. Claiming such an outlook may be the common, even (undeservingly) hegemonic, idea of a really "philosophical" orientation; but it is, in itself, simply mistaken. "Viewing everything from nowhere" is actually just another way of *being* historical, indeed a way of being very heavily "burdened" by history indeed. Seeing this point in a preliminary way in this chapter will help clarify what the rest of the book is about.

### THE CARTESIAN CONCEPTION OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Everyone knows the story of Descartes' epistemological turn, the skeptical problems it raises, the metaphysical dualism it implies, and the objective rules of reason it promises for philosophy. This is simply the familiar story of the origin of modern Western philosophy. Today, of course, many philosophers tell this story polemically, discomforted in various ways by the "Cartesian," or "Enlightenment," or objectivist outlook that we have come to see here and have also come to resist for various reasons, even while we nevertheless remain its inheritors.<sup>5</sup> Some worry especially about the way this legacy still encourages us to privilege an image of disinterested and generic rationality—and thus to make the epistemic analysis of this kind of rationality philosophy's core topic. Others worry more about the metaphysical options that, in light of the *Meditations*, still seem to force themselves upon us. If, for example, ideas are inside and things are outside, how "realist" can we ever hope to be? Must we be materialists about Nature? Or, if universal materialism seems unacceptable, must we be dualists?

For others (including me), however, the real problem with the Cartesian legacy is not the lingering influence of this or that epistemological or metaphysical doctrine. It is rather the continuing appeal of the kind of philosophical standpoint from which these doctrines can be developed. Postpositivists like Rorty, Taylor, MacIntyre, Margolis, and Putnam have lately joined post-Husserlians like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Gadamer in rejecting the very idea of such a standpoint. They all want to deny that philosophy might ever transcend the conditions of its origin, bracket off the concerns of its time and place, and ultimately take up the viewpoint of an all-seeing eye—in order to think, as Nagel says, "from Nowhere."<sup>6</sup> For these figures, the deepest and least appreciated problem with Descartes' legacy is that it perpetuates an illusion—the illusion that philosophy might actually be capable of becoming standpointless or presuppositionless, or at least take complete possession of the process of "choosing" whatever presuppositions it ultimately does accept.



All of this, however, is easier to say than it is to incorporate into one's own thinking. To be convinced that a view from Nowhere is an illusion, and to take *other* philosophers to task for failing to understand this, is not enough. In fact, it is all too easy to think oneself an opponent of the View from Nowhere, and yet present one's arguments . . . as if from Nowhere. Indeed, simple "opposition" to this objectivistic position is a large part of the problem. For it is one thing to present reasons for "denying" the possibility of a neutral or presuppositionless position and for "affirming" on the contrary that every inquiry and every meta-inquiry is the determinate act of a determinate thinker. It is quite another thing, and something much more difficult, to take to heart, in one's own thinking, the fact that it is our very nature to "be" historical.

Actually, an entirely self-possessed, ahistorical standpoint is nothing of the kind. Contrary to its famous objectivist public relations, it is really an expression of a richly determinate modern Western historicity—the function of an inheritance out of which, at least in North America and Western Europe, "one" still continually finds "oneself" speaking, sometimes even in the presence of a conscious recognition of the inappropriateness of this way of speaking to the very things one is trying to say. For just this reason, "denying" the possibility of an ahistorical perspective and "affirming" the contextualized nature of all philosophy cannot undo, and in fact tends to reinforce, the illusion of self-possession; for affirmation and denial are properties of the kind of critique that keeps the focus on the folly of others, and thus encourages the critics to continue to think of themselves as performing purely voluntary acts of opposition, accomplished . . . as if from Nowhere.

In this introductory chapter, I am concerned with such seemingly easy, and thus inevitably compromised, opposition—concerned, in other words, with critics who reject in ahistorical terms an ahistorical conception of philosophy and its doctrines. I will focus primarily on two of the more radical critics from the empiricist-positivist side of the Cartesian legacy—namely, Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor. Although their anti-Cartesianism is considerably more telling and effective than that of many of their analytic colleagues, their story is in important ways still quite typical. Each, I claim, retains more of the standpointless or ahistorical ideal than he realizes. I begin with a brief review of Descartes' own conception of this ideal. I then argue—starting with reference to some of the more moderately "pro-history" critics of this ideal (e.g., Margaret Wilson), but ultimately using Rorty and Taylor as my main cases in point—that current criticism of Descartes' legacy is often so preoccupied with issues concerning his method and his metaphysical doctrines that the problematic character of the standpointless, "Cartesian" orientation itself is insufficiently considered.<sup>7</sup> I conclude this chapter by showing how, as a result, this orientation is in some ways still implicitly—and unfortunately—embraced. (In Chapter 3, I will employ Descartes' own writings to show that becoming a Cartesian is not even possible.)



## DESCARTES' EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

To modern ears, it is difficult not to hear pre-modern accounts of philosophical inquiry as strangely indirect and unsatisfactory. Socratic elenchus, for example, can seem so unstudied, so personal, one might even say provincial. As I will argue in the next chapter, this unsatisfactory appearance of things has driven many contemporary philosophers to make the mistake of constructing a more formal account of “the Socratic method”—as if Socrates’ failure to make it explicit that he had one threatens to undermine the philosophical worth of what he was doing. With and after Descartes, we have all learned to say that the mind must be methodologically prepared for thinking. From the start, it must be rule-governed, deliberate, and at least to some extent even distrustful of its very willingness to seek truth. Genuine thinking only begins when the mind follows something like an “order of reasons,” after first withdrawing allegiance from the pre-existing and ill-acquired beliefs that constitute our initial condition.

There is, of course, considerable distance between Descartes’ own interpretation of this methodological turn and the “reconstructive” epistemologies of more recent times. For despite all his fanfare about settling for nothing less than certainty, when we judge him by his results, he presents us with a thoroughly problematic metaphysics and a lot of bad science. Descartes, alas, talked a better game than he played. The lesson, clearly, seems to be that truly rigorous thinking cannot be guaranteed by well-intentioned “meditation,” guided by a few extrapolations from the ideas of mathematical intuition and deduction. Reason needs more rigorous supervision; hence, the subsequent story of modern philosophy reads easily as a series of increasingly science-minded attempts to take Descartes’ epistemological turn more seriously than did Descartes himself.

This reconstructionist story is by no means just an empiricist-positivist tale, especially if one focuses on our more immediate inheritance from the last century or so. In his survey of the “identity crisis” experienced by German philosophy with the demise of its Hegelian and Romantic forms in the nineteenth century, Herbert Schnädelbach finds four kinds of attempted solution, all of which involve redefining philosophical practice in such a way as to make it more respectable when judged against the natural sciences.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in what follows, I will pay closer attention to the empiricist-positivist side of the modern tale, because it is this line of development that contributes most directly to the continuing tendency among English-speaking philosophers to regard reference to their inherited tradition as merely optional.

Let us note first, then, that all the modern attempts to out-Descartes Descartes are responsible for perpetuating and carrying forward not one but two basic features of his epistemology. There are not only his doctrines and his method to reconsider and update; there is also the question of how to render his meditative standpoint as neutral and disengaged as he maintained



it needs to be if the mind is ever to deploy his method and develop his doctrines. In a famous passage in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes asserts that

even though we know other people's demonstrations by heart . . . and even if we have read all the arguments of [say] Plato and Aristotle, we shall never become philosophers if we ourselves are unable to make a sound judgment on whatever comes up for discussion; in this case what we would seem to have learned would not be science but history.<sup>9</sup>

I want to give Descartes as much credit—and as much blame—for setting up this preference for “science” over “history” as he usually gets for privileging method over doctrine. The contrast between science and history runs throughout Descartes' writings. In the “Rule” just quoted, we are admonished to pay as much attention to the fact that “science” is the one great thing and “history” another, lesser thing as we do to the fact of science itself and the conditions of its rationality. Understanding how to measure one's own “sound judgments” is essential, but so also is recognizing that knowledge of tradition cannot help us do this. A Cartesian science of right reasoning thus achieves its goal by turning its back on the philosophical past. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes even explains that he writes in French rather than Latin because—as his forced option depicts it—he expects better justice from those who use only “natural reason” than from those who rely on “the writings of the ancients” (AT 6:77). He damns history with faint praise. Studying the tradition, he says, is like traveling. As with travel, history can broaden one's horizons and counteract provincialism. Yet in the end, just like those who spend too much time traveling eventually become strangers in their own country, so also those who are too curious about the practices of past ages usually remain quite ignorant about the (superior) practices of the present. In other words, the sociohistorical study of logical reasoners is not epistemology. A mind that really cares about the principles of good reasoning must not be distracted by too much consideration of what (and how) other people happen to have thought.

Among his empiricist and positivist readers, Descartes' advice was dutifully followed. His interpretation of rationality was soon displaced, but everyone from Locke the underlaborer to Reichenbach the reconstructionist went on to offer their own epistemology in a tone of voice just as fundamentally ahistorical as Descartes' own. And why not? His basic model for the structure and function of right reason continued to seem entirely appropriate. The impressive universality achieved in mathematics and the growing success of the emerging empirical sciences seemed to confirm the prescience of Descartes' decision to focus on the essential conditions for reasoning about number, figure, and nature. And in ever longer retrospect, the treatments of rationality in pre-scientific times seemed by contrast ever more embarrassing.



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The appropriate conclusion thus seemed obvious. Philosophy, in the form of a science-minded epistemology, is the main thing; history, in the form of stories about pre-scientific ideas and methods is, however interesting, never more than an intellectual diversion. Eventually, not only the history of ideas and methods but also the history of any individual's thinking about ideas and methods were excluded. By the time of Comte and Mill, Descartes' "meditation" seemed a hopeless mix of logic and psychology.<sup>10</sup> If every cogito must follow the same rules in the same way to obtain truth and avoid falsity, then all that really matters philosophically is the analysis of these rules, not the story of anyone's experience of discovering and using them. Descartes' readers thus became more Cartesian than their master. An individual thinker's personal-psychological history is just as irrelevant to epistemic inquiry as are human history and tradition in general. Actual minds may continue to be shaped and bewitched by inherited opinion, but the rules that test the warrantability of their opinions are quite independent of any shaping and bewitching. The point of epistemology is to establish these rules; the less said about the struggle to acquire and follow them, the better.

John Stuart Mill thus speaks for generations of epistemologists, both before and long after him, when he describes his *Logic* as having no need to concern itself

with the nature of the act of judging or believing; the consideration of that act, as a phenomenon of mind, belongs to another science [i.e., psychology]. Philosophers, however, from Descartes downwards, and especially from the era of Leibniz and Locke, have by no means observed this distinction. . . . A proposition, they would have said, is but the expression in words of a judgment. . . . Conformably to these views, almost all the writers on logic in the last two centuries, whether English, German, or French, have made their theory of propositions . . . a theory of judgments. They considered a proposition, or a judgment, for they used the two words indiscriminately, to consist in affirming or denying one idea of another.<sup>11</sup>

One can see the result of this line of reasoning in the fact that, like Descartes himself, epistemologies of the earlier modern period tend to focus on the knower (especially in its capacity for judgment and its relation to an external world), whereas later epistemologies ask instead about the ideal conditions for knowledge (both logical and linguistic). Mill's undeserved reputation for advocating "psychologism" notwithstanding, this shift of focus is clearly marked out in his explanation of the difference between his study of reasoning and the studies of his predecessors. He straddles the transition with his reminder that before him, epistemologists "made their theory of *propositions* . . . a theory of *judgments*," but already "used the two words indiscriminately."



Note carefully, however, that this Cartesian process of decontextualization and purification affected not only the determination of epistemology's subject matter and methodology but the self-image of epistemic inquirers as well. For Descartes' progeny, the process of analyzing the conditions and objects of knowledge must be conducted by a mind that is just as free from the influence of inheritance and habit as are these conditions and objects themselves. In retrospect, it is evident that Descartes himself did not succeed in generating an epistemology from his projected ideal outlook of "spectator rather than actor." As we look back from the perspective of a more thoroughgoing Cartesianism, Descartes himself seems to have remained "entangled" in epistemically irrelevant matters; moreover, he still imagined that politics, faith, and morals were simply extrascientific concerns that follow their own logic. Not only does the *Meditations* come to look as if it were still written from a psychologically tainted angle; in the *Discourse*, Descartes specifically limits epistemic inquiry to the question of conditions for only some knowledge claims. Theology and ethics, for example, are specifically exempted from meditative scrutiny. In preparing for my impending task, he says, and "in order to live as happily as I could" while pursuing it, he provided himself with four provisional moral maxims and then, "having set them aside together with the truths of faith, which have always been foremost among my beliefs, I judged that I could freely undertake to rid myself of *all the rest* of my opinions" (AT 6:22, 28, my emphasis). The *Meditations* are about "the rest" of his opinions—that his, his beliefs about figure, number, and (the book of) Nature. In the *Rules*, he even cautions us that settling for nothing less than certainty in knowledge "does not preclude our believing that what has been revealed by God is more certain than any knowledge, since faith . . . is an act of will rather than . . . understanding" (AT 10:370). The Descartes who makes this comment is no "Cartesian" epistemologist.

Later thinkers, of course, were not so bashful about subjecting such allegedly extrascientific concerns to standard epistemic scrutiny. Descartes' own failure to do this only emboldened those who came after him. In fact, viewed in the light of Descartes' anti-historical advice about the dangers of historical study for an aspiring epistemologist, even the notoriously pinched conception of philosophy in logical empiricism seems to be nothing more than Descartes taken strictly at his word. Philosophy, admits Reichenbach, must obviously begin from the "sociological fact" of the practices of actual scientists; but as philosophy, it must then immediately demand, "What is" their kind of knowledge, really, and what are its actual "foundations and structure"? As a factual matter, he explains, genuine knowledge may indeed be building up in the sciences, but it is the philosophers, as historically uncommitted "logicians of science," who must help the sciences grow cognizant of themselves by explicating the conditions of their success. "Logic," asserts Reichenbach, simply *is* this essentialist "analysis of science"; it "expresses nothing else."<sup>12</sup>



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Following this line of reasoning, logical empiricism helped fashion the Cartesian legacy into the image of the “analytic” philosopher in what Urmson calls its “classical sense.” Such a philosopher, as Reichenbach famously phrases it, is the rightful replacement for that

philosopher of the old school [who] is usually trained in literature and history [and who] has never learned the precision methods of the mathematical sciences or experienced the happiness of demonstrating a law of nature by a verification of all its consequences.<sup>13</sup>

Here is the “scientific philosopher” who has finally got Descartes’ double legacy right. For this philosopher has, just as Descartes wanted it, “entirely abandoned the study of letters” and concentrated instead on the logical analysis of the rules of reason in relation to the observation of nature.<sup>14</sup> Mid-twentieth-century positivists are thus nothing more than especially conscientious and rigorous Cartesians.<sup>15</sup>

### MODERATE REVISIONS OF DESCARTES’ ADVICE

Today, of course, there are no positivists. The positivist era is over, and everyone is a postpositivist. Yet is it that easy? One should be very suspicious of confident expressions of quick and thorough philosophical transformation. Let me begin with a recent example that has become quite well known.

Upon accepting Margaret Wilson’s 1992 paper on sensible qualities, the editors of the *Philosophical Review* asked her to add an introductory section on the question of “the history of philosophy in philosophy today.”<sup>16</sup> Speaking for what she clearly regards as the enlightened majority of her analytic colleagues, Wilson expressly opposes the old positivist hostility toward the tradition. Indeed, she asserts, English-speaking philosophers today deserve praise for their greatly increased interest in the history of philosophy. She complains that critics of her tradition’s failure to take the past seriously have exaggerated the situation by supporting their criticisms primarily with citations from some of the more notoriously anti-historical works published before 1950. The generalization that analytic philosophers are typically insensitive or display arrogance toward traditional thinkers is, she says, “a fairly bum rap.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet a careful reading shows that Wilson’s way of arguing this point does not conform to her own self-portrait. Several of the “historically interested” colleagues to whom she appeals clearly do not help make her case against the bum rap. Bernard Williams, for example, is not obviously more sensitive to Descartes “in context” than Russell on Leibniz, or Ayer on Berkeley, or Bennett on Kant. In his famous (and still widely cited) commentary, Williams states flatly that he plans to judge “the most interesting



philosophical concerns of Descartes” entirely in “twentieth-century terms,” and he goes on to say that his book is explicitly structured so as to be a “rational reconstruction of Descartes’ thought, where the rationality of the construction is essentially and undisguisedly conceived in a contemporary style.”<sup>18</sup> The irony in Williams’ use of the phrase “rational reconstruction” seems to be entirely unconscious.

Then, too, there is Wilson’s strange defense of the explanation some colleagues have given for ignoring traditional figures, even when these figures would seem to be directly relevant to their own work and are judged entirely in contemporary terms. She approves, for example, of David Lewis’ decision not to consult Leibniz when writing *On the Plurality of Worlds*, on Lewis’ stated grounds that historians had not helped him to understand what Leibniz meant, and that he was not trained to figure Leibniz out for himself.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there is Wilson’s (somewhat embarrassing) argument that precisely because there is still so much disagreement among analytic philosophers about how important the study of philosophy’s past is to current practice, we should all feel free simply to “choose” whether to “define [our] positions in relation to the long history of philosophical thought” or not (HPPT, 208). I ignore the appeal to truth-by-poll-taking and focus instead on the voluntarism it appears to involve.

Like many other analytic philosophers today, Wilson holds that if one speaks in opposition to positivism, and if one is willing say that the study the history of philosophy has value (maybe occasionally even “philosophical” value) and that it is therefore sometimes good to cultivate a “conscious relation” to it, then one has successfully avoided the charge of not taking the philosophical past seriously. But this is a mistake. One does not escape the residual influence of positivism’s hostility toward history by being tolerant of those who now find their predecessors interesting, or by thanking historians for making previous positions “clear,” or by sometimes “deciding” to make conscious use of intellectual ancestors and historical writing. In fact, such gestures only reinforce the positivist presumption that we can leave the past behind—that our relationship to tradition is a matter of choice. The real issue is not better contextualization of the epistemologies and theories of others, but the questionable legitimacy of the self-understanding of contemporary philosophers who assert that contextualizing their own thought is optional.

The problem is that, as the editors of one famous collection put it in explaining their title, we need to ask about philosophy *in* history, not philosophy *and* history.<sup>20</sup> It may be true that analytic philosophers today are more interested in and receptive to the study of the tradition than were the positivists. Yet many aspiring postpositivists still fail to consider the effect philosophy’s past already has on their current thinking by the time they get around to asking what to do with the tradition. As the editors of *Philosophy in History* explain, the ghost of Descartes’ ahistorical imperative still haunts the present, in form of a de facto division of labor between philosophy and



history, according to which historians allegedly have the quasi-respectable but non-philosophical job of narrating, understanding, and preserving the tradition, while philosophers—even philosophers who do history—have the weightier task of analyzing and judging the past by putting a proper distance between what we now know and what is obsolete. In other words, the historian is depicted as construing past theories and systems “in their own terms”; the philosopher is given pride of place as someone who treats all previous thinkers as if they were colleagues, perhaps already (albeit imperfectly) addressing “problems” that we now know how to handle.

Like Wilson, the editors of *Philosophy in History* lament the lingering influence of this dichotomy—this forced option which, we should recall, is precisely the either/or that Descartes draws in the *Discourse*. But unlike Wilson, the editors complain of the pervasive influence this dichotomy still has. Even today, they argue, many analytic philosophers fail to recognize the “historical contingency” of their own practices. The cure, it might seem, is to show up positivism more thoroughly for what it really is—namely, just the expression of one more time-bound and now outmoded intellectual position. The editors’ strategy, in other words, is to undermine the lingering influence of positivism by historicizing it.

Yet as radical as this strategy might seem to Urmson’s “classical” kind of analytic philosopher, it is really quite unsatisfactorily moderate. By linking the cultivation of historical self-consciousness so tightly to the critique of positivism, the editors of *Philosophy in History* reinforce the conviction that simply promoting this critique suffices to turn one into a postpositivist. But it cannot. As many of the authors in their own collection (perhaps unwittingly but very typically) show, it is quite possible to exercise a sort of preliminary and therapeutic historical sensitivity—that is, to explain why they are no longer positivists—without ever touching on the deeper assumption that this leaves them free to pursue their own interests in the same basically ahistorical way.<sup>21</sup> In fact, when their arguments are viewed from this angle, it appears as if what many so-called postpositivists really believe is that logical empiricism was not ahistorical enough. Like Wilson, they see postpositivism as a matter of making better “choices.” In R.C. Sleight’s words, cited with approval by Wilson, although it “does no harm” to read Locke on personal identity or Leibniz on possible worlds, it is much better to read Shoemaker or Kripke. “[T]here is progress in philosophy,” insists Sleight, “and it is not necessary to study the history of a philosophical problem in order to make a fundamental contribution toward the understanding, perhaps even the solution, of that problem.”<sup>22</sup>

Note the manner in which Sleight makes his pronouncements. He appears to assume that “progress,” “philosophical problem,” and “solution” are all uncontroversial notions—and further that Real Philosophy has primarily to do with progress and problem solving as he understands them. In what tone of voice are these assumptions made, and what would it take to make them a topic of critical reflection? In short, there is still a widespread tendency



in analytic philosophy to confine criticisms of the forced option between history and philosophy either to the effects it has on other thinkers, or to the question of whether and when to deal with the purely optional topic of historical study. Neither sort of criticism requires any reflection on how this way of thinking about the matter might *already* be evidence of a distinctive, traditional inheritance in the critics' own thinking. Why, for example, are history and philosophy set up as a dichotomy in the first place, and is one ever perched in the position of not yet having any historical and/or philosophical commitments, considering which of these "objects" to "choose"? It is such issues as this one that are addressed by more radical postpositivists like Rorty and Taylor.

### RORTY'S ANTI-POSITIVISM

Like his more moderate colleagues, Rorty rejects as reductive and dated the old efforts to model philosophical analysis exclusively on scientific procedures. Such scientism, he argues, is in fact just one last attempt to depict philosophers as possessing some special "method" that makes them wiser or more comprehensive in vision than anyone else. But this claim, he asserts, is patently "genealogical"—that is, one that involves bold and creative reconstructions of the past designed simply to justify a present attitude.<sup>23</sup>

One feature of Rorty's position, however, marks him off sharply from the moderates. His critique of positivism involves what might be called a long-term as well as short-term appeal to history. It is true enough, he says, that in the past fifty years analytic philosophy has been "moved by its own, internal anti-positivist dialectic" away from the doctrines and intellectual imperatives of logical empiricism (*Consequences*, 223). But to really become a postpositivist, he argues, one has to understand how logical empiricism (and through it, analytic philosophy in Urmson's classical sense) remains complicit in philosophy's original and much older master plan. For a time, the positivists managed to obscure this fact by glorying in the conviction that they were merely offering a white-hat defense of scientific explanation against the black-hat mumbo jumbo of theology and metaphysics. The problem, says Rorty, is that this defense of the scientific method is at bottom just as deluded as the earlier defenses of, say, Kantian or Cartesian procedures. It expresses the ancient and ultimately "Platonic" dream of finding THE method for THE set of philosophical problems.

Hence, for Rorty, an authentically postpositivist mind must first of all be radically post-Platonic; that is, it must understand that there can never be a final, canonical list of philosophical methods or problems. In earlier writings, Rorty claims that today's analytic philosopher must settle for being a kind of lawyerlike, "unspecialized intellectual" with really nothing more lofty to do than engage in the pluralistically motivated practice of "putting together arguments and pulling them apart" (*Consequences*,



220–21). In later works, he shows increasing distaste even for such a “relaxed” and post-Platonic analytic philosophy, and he refuses to put any form of nonanalytical philosophy in its place. Instead, he cultivates what he famously calls the “privately ironic” and publicly “politically liberal” stance of pragmatist intellectual non-neutrality—thus urging by example the possibility of a “poeticized culture” that involves our constantly seeking, not justified “truth,” but ever new and more creative ways of thinking, speaking, and acting.<sup>24</sup>

But just how radically postpositivist are these images? Of course, neither “unspecialized intellectuals” nor “liberal ironists” are “scientific” philosophers. Yet there is a deep sense in which Rorty remains as much what he calls a Platonist about philosophy as any positivist. For his recommendations, whether they are intended as epistemic reform or culture critique, continue to be expressed in the self-confident language of choice. Our proper aim, the later Rorty typically says, is to become “pragmatists without method.” We must “throw away” the old epistemological and metaphysical idea that once shaped our understanding, so that intellectual life today can be

pursued *without much reference* to the traditional distinctions between the cognitive and the noncognitive . . . or between the propositional and the nonpropositional. In particular . . . we could *get rid of* the notion that there was a special “wissenschaftlich” way of dealing with general ‘philosophical’ ideas (a notion that Dewey did his best to discountenance), then we would have much less trouble thinking of the entire culture, from physics to poetry, as a single, continuous, seamless activity in which the divisions are merely institutional or pedagogical.<sup>25</sup>

Careful readers will note that Rorty characterizes postpositivist philosophy here as actually accomplishing what Rorty, writing as one of *Philosophy in History* editors, condemns positivism for even imagining. Citing passages like this one, Taylor criticizes Rorty for seeing the whole issue in terms of making anti-Cartesian “choices.” I will return to this criticism in the next section, for I believe it is fundamentally correct. There is, however, something more involved here than just Rorty’s epistemic decisionism. There is the question of what motivates Rorty’s own particular judgments about what to chose, and on this issue Taylor has less to say.

Consider closely the picture Rorty presents. First, the moderate therapy of historical study is put into play. Philosophical “analysis” gets reformed, pluralized, contextualized, maybe even reduced to culture critique. Yet all of this together is viewed as constituting a fundamentally progressive break with our Platonic past. Now philosophy is going to be really mature. It will need no further therapeutic help from either short-term or long-term historical memory (though, of course, it may “choose” to call on them). It will be free to immerse itself “candidly” in the consensus tests of its community; for not only has it followed positivism in freeing itself from the older



traditions of theology and metaphysics, it has now “got rid” of positivism as well.

In fact, however, this idea of a candid, post-traditional philosophical maturity is nothing of the kind. To assume that if one no longer chooses to talk in terms of theology or metaphysics or positivist rejections of theology and metaphysics, one in fact no longer thinks in terms of theology, metaphysics, or positivism is, of course, the stuff of self-deception. I am picking on Rorty’s rhetoric here, but only in order to throw light by contrast on the traditionalism Rorty still clearly maintains. For even while praising a new outlook that aspires to give allegedly more modest and pluralistic treatment to various postpositivist “styles” or communities of consensus, there is nothing new or modest or pluralistic about his way of promoting this new position. The outlook he recommends is significantly at odds with the attitude he displays in recommending it. About the virtues of postpositivism, complains Putnam, Rorty still speaks in “Carnapian” tones.<sup>26</sup> His new pragmatism is announced in a voice expressive of precisely the old, ahistorical spirit. Rorty has thought about this criticism. He admits, for example, that in the wrong hands even his pragmatism might be conceived “Platonically.” He assures us that he has no desire to speak from such an “objectivist” viewpoint; indeed, he repeatedly denies that there is one. Why, then, can he not stop talking as if there is?

The answer, I think, is that, like the moderates, Rorty tends to criticize positivism by *opposing* it, thus reinforcing in his own outlook the old Cartesian conviction that “today” (instead of, say, 1641 or 1937) philosophy may finally “break free” of tradition. Rorty says he now finds himself attracted to non-analytic philosophers for engaging in what he calls “historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity.”<sup>27</sup> But he misses the point of the last half of this phrase. It is not the contextualization or recontextualization of the activity of *other* philosophers but the cultivation of an awareness of the determinateness of “their *own* activity” that these philosophers stress. What Rorty’s writings wonderfully exemplify is that even a brutally honest (i.e., really “candid”) attempt to enact an intellectually modest philosophizing will sabotage itself if it continues to be accompanied by a fundamentally Cartesian understanding of what philosophers should find when they “reflect” on their own standpoint. Just as Descartes describes meditation in terms of self-possession and “resolve” *because* he sees science as one thing and historical study as another, so Rorty continues to speak about a leap beyond positivism *because* this would be a way finally to leave tradition behind. The choice for philosophers today, he says, is whether to continue the traditional search for

natural starting points which are distinct from cultural traditions, or whether all philosophy should do is compare and contrast cultural traditions. . . . The pragmatist does not think there is anything like [the first option]. . . . But he does think that in the process of *playing*



*vocabularies and cultures off against each other*, we produce new and better ways of talking and acting . . . that come to seem clearly better than their predecessors.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere, he adds that “neither the notion of universal validity nor that of privileged access to truth are necessary” in order for neo-pragmatists to “explain how the new ideas might . . . solve, or dissolve, problems created by the old ones” and thereby “work toward intersubjective agreement without being lured by the promise of universal validity.”<sup>29</sup> Sure. But consider the vantage point from which such sentiments as these could be written, and what cannot be accomplished from this vantage point.

Neo-pragmatists who reject the idea of natural starting points and entertain the idea of “playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other” are certainly not thinking of *themselves* as encultured. Nor are Rortyans who depict this neo-pragmatism and the vain search for natural starting points *as options*. And hand-waving in the direction of “intellectual and moral progress” by means of general descriptions of what intellectuals might accomplish is not the same as giving an account of how one actually *moves from* old to new ideas, and *works toward* intersubjective agreement. It may be true, as Rorty says, that claims which seem absurd to one generation come to be the common sense of later generations. Of course, one might reply to him in the spirit of business as usual, stand back from the old and new ideas, and analyze the good and bad reasons for moving from one to the other. But there is a prior question; namely, how is such movement possible at all? Rorty’s neo-pragmatist can only say “by choice.”

In the end, Rorty is trapped between his correct and historically minded but undigested claim that every philosophical standpoint already *is* contextualized and his ahistorical and polemically driven *choice* of an alternative to the idea of natural starting points. At bottom, this means his own orientation is simply a variant of the Cartesianism he inherits but says he rejects. Taylor rightly pounces on the fact that Rorty imagines that he is “choosing” his neo-pragmatism. Yet if he sees the ahistorical voluntarism in Rorty’s strategy, he is less illuminating about how it still expresses a traditional epistemological inheritance. As a result, Taylor himself mostly manages to avoid Rorty’s epistemic decisionism, but also misses the way his own alternative continues to express the same inheritance—albeit to a lesser extent and in a somewhat different way.

## TAYLOR’S TRANSFORMATION OF “E”PISTEMOLOGY

In general Taylor, too, criticizes analytic philosophers for their “habit of treating philosophy as an exercise which could be carried on in entirely contemporary terms.”<sup>30</sup> Like Rorty, Taylor traces this habit to the lingering influence of Descartes’ “Epistemological model” (with a capital E). But



as I have already indicated, Taylor objects to Rorty's account of how to "overcome" its influence. To him, Rorty's attempt to "turn his back" on the Cartesian orientation, "far from being a liberation . . . seems paradoxically a formula for remaining trapped in it." One cannot "walk away from the old epistemology," argues Taylor, "without *working out* an alternative conception."<sup>31</sup>

Taylor has much to say about this process of "working out" alternative conceptions. First, it means taking seriously that philosophy, like every human activity, is "inherently historical." We are never disinterested and self-possessed minds; we are always, in his phrase, "engaged agents."<sup>32</sup> Hence, when we experience "the need to escape from a given social form"—in this case, Cartesian epistemology—a liberatory response cannot come by conjuring up a new option and imagining we can just choose it as if from an already liberated standpoint. Hence, we must not be misled by Taylor's somewhat unfortunate terminology for this process. To "work out" an "alternative" is not a matter of "deciding" on a "new" outlook. The process develops, he says, in terms of "*historical redescription*"—which he defines as a kind of reflective, mediating effort to "articulate the unsaid in present practices," in order to "undo the forgetting" of the origins of a now problematic practice or social form.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the point of Taylor's historical redescriptions is first of all to make it clear that a familiar practice that is now being experienced as problematic is not the necessity it seems to be but only a very familiar, actualized possibility. In the "Epistemological" case at hand, this involves the genealogical reconstruction of the earlier formulations of a Cartesian model of epistemic inquiry whose lesser versions are now being forgetfully recapitulated with increasing discomfort, as if there were no other truly "philosophical" way of asking about the nature of knowing. Once clearly exposed, this Cartesian model can be subjected to a critique of its impossible idea of a "foundational justification of knowledge," and we can then start to consider what it would take to *transform* our inherited versions of this model so as to cultivate an "awareness of the limits and conditions of our knowledge" of the sort that might "help us overcome the illusions of disengagement . . . that are constantly [being] generated by [our] civilization."<sup>34</sup>

Here, Taylor's target is the classical foundationalist model of epistemology itself. But this interpretive strategy appears everywhere in his writings. In his PIH essay, he argues that the classical model still haunts Quine (18–20). Elsewhere, the model is held responsible for the modern (and equally mythical) ideal of a disengaged and autonomous agent, the (unjustified) hegemony of naturalistic construals of the human sciences, and the traditional (and much over-emphasized) idea of the legal and political identity of "individuals."<sup>35</sup> In each case, instead of just positing a new articulation (regarding, respectively, historical redescription itself; agency, rationality, and semantic theory; the interpretive human sciences; and recognition/cultural identity), Taylor starts with a genealogy of the unsatisfactory articulation and then



*moves toward* something more satisfying by spelling out precisely how current lived experience finds the old articulation unsatisfactory.

For those familiar with continental-style “hermeneutic” philosophy, this will all sound very familiar. Taylor shows himself to be one of the few thinkers associated primarily with the analytic tradition who has taken Nietzsche’s idea of historicity to heart. In what follows, however, I put more stress on inherited elements of Taylor’s outlook that betray his good instincts about the present—just as I do in the chapters on Descartes and Comte. The strategy, as I will explain in the chapter on Dilthey, is inspired by the early Heidegger’s interpretation of *Beßerverstehen* as a kind of “destructive retrieval.”

In any case, what Taylor seeks is a postpositivist alternative to Epistemology that aims at “*continuity-through-transformation* in the tradition of self-critical reason.”<sup>36</sup> Through this sort of transformation, he says, we can simultaneously do justice both to the embodied and contextualized character of living and thinking, and to the experientially pressing need to move beyond an unsatisfactory present practice without the illusion of just leaving it behind. We might, in other words, both effect a “radical break” with the objectivism of the old epistemology and yet also “carry further [its legitimate] demand for self-clarity about our nature as knowing [and acting] agents, by adopting a . . . more defensible notion of what this entails” (479/14). The difficult task, of course, is finding a way of discussing this process that is itself no longer Epistemological.

In order to work out a proper discourse for the articulation of continuity-through-transformation,<sup>37</sup> Taylor appeals to what he considers two insightful but deeply flawed postmodern positions. On the one hand, there are neo-Nietzscheans like Foucault and Derrida, who are full of telling insights about the way that “no construal [of knowledge] is quite innocent, something is always suppressed; and . . . some interlocutors are always advantaged relative to others, for any language.”<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, there are critics like Habermas who complain that the neo-Nietzschean position implies, as Taylor puts it, that “there can be no talk of epistemic gain in passing from one construal to another.” In this, the neo-Nietzscheans seem to display a streak of “irrationalism” that threatens not just knowledge specifically but human interaction generally. Against this threat, Habermas is said by Taylor to

defend the tradition of critical reason . . . [even to the point of] hold[ing] on to a formal understanding of reason . . . [albeit one that is] purged of the monological errors of earlier variants . . . [because he] fears for the fate of a truly universal and critical ethic should one go all the way with [the neo-Nietzschean] critique. (483/17)

Taylor explains that he shares Habermas’ concern, and he goes on to say that he, too, thinks the neo-Nietzschean “arguments for not taking



argument seriously are uniformly bad.” Yet he also believes that Habermas himself fails to formulate a position that responds adequately to the neo-Nietzscheans’ correct and telling recognition of the always less than “innocent” condition of reason for any actual human beings.

Summing up his evaluation of these two postmodern forms of critique, Taylor concludes that their dispute is not quite a draw. “Whoever is ultimately right,” he says, “the dispute has to be fought out on the terrain” of the Habermassian defenders of critical reason. For the neo-Nietzscheans have simply failed to establish that there can be no legitimate talk about “epistemic gain” or loss “between” one construal or articulation and another. The “main weight” of their case, he says, is carried by “an utterly caricatural view of [critical rationality] as involving a belief in a kind of total self-transparent clarity which would make even Hegel blush. The rhetoric deployed around this has the effect of obscuring the possibility [of] a third alternative” (484/17). Taylor is convinced that there is such a third alternative—one that may be closer to Habermas than Derrida, but avoids both a “naive, angelic,” hyper-Hegelian model of intellectual clarity and also the wholesale, “Derridian” sort of refusal to argue on the patently unsatisfactory grounds that arguing would compromise the critique of modern rationality.

Yet Taylor’s analysis of the battle between the neo-Nietzscheans and the Habermassians “over the corpse of Epistemology” is not so neatly and satisfactorily dialectical as he may have intended. Note carefully that when he evaluates this battle, he insists that it must be in terms of the *Habermassian* question of how to “sett[e] the matter of truth *between* construals.” Taylor argues that even if Habermas’ own treatment of rationality is still excessively formalistic, he is surely right to reject the neo-Nietzschean caricatures of reason. In this way, Taylor concludes, Habermas reminds us that after all the proper things have been said about the contextualized and duplicitous nature of every instance of actual reasoning, the basic question remains: what “arguments” should go into the space “between” one construal and another, and what “epistemic gain” is there in selecting one construal over the other?

In asking these questions, however, Taylor appears to forget some of his own advice. What we need, he says elsewhere, is not more traditional epistemic talk of how to solve the epistemological *problem* of finding criteria for evaluating juxtaposed claims or construals. Instead, we need a new sort of philosophical self-understanding that monitors the actual process of getting from one construal to another. Taylor argues repeatedly that this process of *getting from* is not a “problem” and neither needs to be or can ever be properly conceptualized in the third person and with epistemic generality.

Taylor’s point is that actual transformations in thinking are not like deductions or inductions, involving separate cognitive steps linked together from the outside by a set of rules. As Taylor explains in his critique of Rorty, the “bad practice” of traditional Epistemology is precisely its “*ex*



*ante*” attempt to define “the” way to understand all movement from one thoughtful construal to another in terms of some sort of external test that “validates” this movement. In actual human practice, he argues, every new interpretation is really always a reinterpretation—a transformation whose appeal depends on our *recognizing how it improves upon* the interpretation thus transformed. No general and external criteria can capture the richness and diversity of this “recognizing” process, and in fact, none is needed. For when we carefully monitor this process as we actually live it, we see that it contains no intervals “between” old and new interpretations that might need “bridging” by procedural rules. What we see is that only *within* this ongoing process and insofar as we really “*live* our transitions, and *struggle* with potential redescriptions,” do we ever actually feel the need—on some occasions, where a more formalized process of thinking seems called for (e.g., in logic and mathematics)—to raise the sort of questions traditionally associated with general theories of truth.<sup>39</sup>

Yet this life-driven critique of general tests for truth conspicuously fails to inform Taylor’s evaluation of the battle between the neo-Nietzscheans and Habermassians. There, he shifts markedly away from his preferred discourse of creative redescription and transformation and returns instead to the familiar language of valid arguments, truth construals, and general problems of cognitive continuity. This shift strongly suggests an at least partial reversion to the old Epistemological outlook. For in Taylor’s preferred discourse, redescription and transformation are said to arise *from within* our lived understanding and be expressive of specific instances of it. Everyday moral life, for example, is filled with experiences like the following:

[W]hen I move from seeing myself as being disinterestedly benevolent to understanding how much I get out of my role as benefactor; when I get beyond a view of myself as a cool loner, and understand how much I’m involved in this relationship, characteristically the emotions I’m trying to describe in each case change as well. . . . Under the previous descriptions I was different; I wasn’t just as I am now under the truer understanding. But what I was then was shaped by the distortion of denial more than I am now. We could say that, in this kind of case, the untruth is part of the reality described . . . [but] *the terms in which to characterize [the earlier description that now seems a] distortion are only available to me now that I have climbed out of it.*<sup>40</sup>

Taylor’s point is that both the earlier and the later descriptions, and the terms that characterize the movement of self-understanding that occurs between them, all emerge together *along with* the presentation of an altered sense of self and as *part of* the process of rearticulation. Hence, the terms that characterize the transition cannot be construed as “independent objects”—that is, externally imposed generalizations that “cover” this sort of transition and “justify” the claim that the latter self-description is “truer” than the



former. For the careful characterization of a transition is not—any more than is the actual self-presentation—the product of an epistemic test for the satisfaction of “knowledge conditions,” deployed from a vantage point external to both the description itself and the process of developing it.

To put the point another way, says Taylor, when the process of construing and reconstruing is understood and characterized from within life as we actually experience and live it, we recognize that

we have a gamut of articulateness. At the bottom, there is the case where no descriptive words are used at all. We live our machismo, say, entirely in the way we stand, walk, address women and each other. It is carried in style and self-presentation entirely. . . . Or we have a language in which the fairs and fouls have names, but still it is not further formulated what makes them fairs and fouls. At the upper end, we have practices where the point of the activity, the underlying goods, or embedded purposes, are fully worked out, and an elaborate justification of them [is] made in philosophical terms.<sup>41</sup>

The hyper-Hegelian (what Rorty calls “Platonic”) idea that philosophy operates mostly or entirely at the “upper end” of articulateness is, of course, the fundamental conviction of Epistemology. In fact, however, when philosophy embraces this assumption, it cuts itself off from most of life as we actually live it—and in the process exaggerates the status and significance of those relatively fewer, upper-end practices for which “elaborate justification” is even possible. “Ontogenetically speaking,” says Taylor, “the inarticulate end” of this gamut of articulation is the “primary” one. “We are introduced to the goods, and inducted into the purposes of our society much more and earlier through its inarticulate practices than through formulations” (PIH, 23).

To take this account seriously, however, is to see that it is unsatisfactory on Taylor’s own grounds for him to insist that the “struggle over the corpse of Epistemology” must be fought out on Habermassian turf.<sup>42</sup> Habermas’ conception of philosophy is very much an “upper end” affair. In his account of critical reason, the process of “giving a defensible notion of . . . self-clarity” is conceived externally, in terms of general conditions of argument that allegedly allow us to adjudicate *between* two articulations. But where is this “between”? Precisely . . . nowhere, in mythical Cartesian space, where nobody “lives.” Perhaps it is true that Taylor’s neo-Nietzscheans are too eager to make the whole issue rhetorical by offering Cartesian burlesques of the very idea of argument; perhaps also their position “stands or falls” with their own alternative notion of “knowledge,” such as it unsatisfactorily is. Yet certainly Nietzsche himself and Taylor, at least usually, see that in most of life and for most purposes, articulation is not really about arguments and “epistemic gains” of any sort, whether these would be evaluated objectivistically or (as in postpositivist epistemologies) by standards that make context, occasion, and even sheer cultural consensus everything.



The problem, as Nietzsche puts it, is that when epistemologists start their analyses of rationality, they all tend to forget that the very idea of “rational thought” is precisely “interpretation according to a scheme we cannot throw off.”<sup>43</sup> He does not capitalize “epistemology,” of course, but by Taylor’s measure, he could have. It is from this Epistemologically understood idea of thinking (which tends either to forget its origins in the experienced world or to imagine we can simply “choose” how and whether to contextualize it), and not from self-describing “life” itself (which Taylor depicts as the immanent process of monitoring our immersion in this world), that we get the idea that there is always a “problem” of connecting and comparing descriptions as if they were segments of some “scheme.”

In his best moments, Taylor envisions the possibility of a philosophical self-understanding that would enable us to monitor the process of “*living* our transitions”—for example, a transition from the old Epistemology to postpositivism. More than Rorty, and certainly more than Habermas, he thus tries to consider life’s practices “from within.” Consider, for example, how Habermas must imagine himself oriented in order to have made such “formal pragmatic” observations as the following. “[I]n the communicative practice of everyday life, in which cognitive explanations, moral expectations, expressions and evaluations interpenetrate, [their] unity is in a certain way always already established.”<sup>44</sup> Yet when he was challenged on precisely the reflective issue of whether such “transcendental-structural” reflection on the “unity” of life might from the beginning itself be “interest-laden”—and thus unworthy of Habermas’ confidence in his capacity simply to get at the way things are—he replied that he would some day “have to come back to that question” (233). His readers are still waiting. Meanwhile, it is just such things as Habermas’ allegedly innocent and disinterested “transcendental pragmatic” assertions that Taylor, following Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, has come to think are most open to question. For these assertions force epistemology to start from a Hegelian rather than a phenomenological image of our “gamut of articulateness.” Yet the same Taylor who says all the things I have cited with praise—for their postpositivist spirit and for their critical bite against Rorty, the neo-Nietzscheans, undiluted Habermas, and hyper-Hegelianism—is also the author who finishes “Overcoming Epistemology” by reverting to the old idea of measuring the “epistemic gain” of later articulations over earlier ones.

The point might be summarized from a different angle, by linking it to the famous Habermas-Gadamer debate over hermeneutics. Taylor is most himself when he is like Gadamer—that is, when he is refusing to see the issue of the nature and philosophical scope Heideggerian-style hermeneutics (roughly, Taylor’s “articulation”) in Habermasian terms. Like Gadamer (but unlike Habermas and, say, Rawls in his exchanges with Habermas), Taylor sees that always moving directly to the question of how to “test” articulations for their defensibility and justification is not just premature but often ontologically reductive. “Before” one asks whether our criteria of



rationality should be Platonic or pluralistic, there is the question of whether it is appropriate on this occasion even to be looking for such criteria—which leads to the still more fundamental question of what it is for a finite, historically determinate being to “articulate” anything at all. Most of the time—for Taylor, as for Gadamer and Heidegger—articulation is seen as involving the sort of “living out transitions and struggling with redescriptions” that are always mischaracterized by epistemic reconstructions in terms of general criteria of legitimacy. Some of the time, however, Taylor reverts to making a “problem” out of how redescriptions are Epistemologically possible at all.

## CONCLUSION: HOW TO PHILOSOPHIZE FROM SOMEWHERE

How, then, should we read those postpositivists who, like Rorty and Taylor, try with only partial success to radicalize the “philosophy in history” problem? It would be comfortably question-begging to reconstruct their “positions” as if from the outside and measure them against some (allegedly more up-to-date) Epistemological criteria. Instead, and to set up the strategy of the chapters to come, I suggest that we consider the following question—with an ear for its degree of resonance in our own circumstances. From what implicit orientation are such thinkers “already” struggling to speak when they express the need for a “lived transition” from their uncomfortably inherited positivism toward an analytic philosophy that has “climbed out of this error”? And to what extent and in what ways do we share this orientation?

Consider, for example, Rorty’s insistence that his pragmatism is neither self-justifying nor merely a choice. It is the right outlook for us, he says, because of the things that “*really matter*, relative to my community.” Who is “us”? And why was Rorty unable to gain much clarity about either the sort of “community” in which this outlook matters or what this “really mattering” involves and how one knows about it?<sup>45</sup> Or consider Taylor’s flawed critique of contemporary efforts to insert some sort of decisionist philosophy “between” the old Epistemological outlook and a new, allegedly “chosen” alternative—as if the search for such criteria were still even necessary, after his own descriptions of intellectual change through redescription show that they are not. Suppose, as Taylor hopes, we find a way to “live though” the process of transforming our old, Epistemologically distorted sense of what it is to know and what it is to understand ourselves. Will the result still be measured in the traditional terms of “epistemic gain”? Indeed, it would appear that Taylor’s concerns—measured by his conceptions of human embodiment and historical determinateness—are no longer fundamentally “epistemic” at all.<sup>46</sup>

Strictly speaking, then, it would seem that neither Rorty (to a greater extent) nor Taylor (to a lesser one) is finally able to *be* in the place in



life from which he is trying to *speak*. Both of them, to some extent, still think with an Epistemological imagery that ultimately permits them only to *contemplate* a postpositivist articulation of a set of practices that they nevertheless somehow *vitaly understand* to be already available to them. This is not a criticism of either Rorty or Taylor. It is my way of saying that, on the still unsatisfactorily answered question of overcoming—or better transformatively working a way past—our still deeply Cartesian inheritance, I “stand” with them.

The real Nietzsche, with his apparently strange grammar, has it right. Suppose the aim of philosophical self-understanding is, as he says, a matter of “*becom[ing] what you are*.”<sup>47</sup> For Nietzsche, as for Taylor, the lived present is not a problematic cognitive moment in which we decide what to think or do next, applying some objectivistically defended general criteria to account for the decision or grabbing both poles of a dialectic in a synthetic way. Granted that being historical is rightly understood as a burden—an inheritance that often seems unsuited to enabling us to do full justice to current experience. This does not mean the past is best regarded as something from which one must to escape—or “twist free,” as French post-modernists like to say—as if we possessed the power to leap into a different and liberated future. Precisely because the past that burdens us already makes us what we are—and precisely *as* this burden—it is also the source of our possible creative transformations of our inheritance. From within life, the same past that already shapes our experiences before we learn how to reflectively awaken to it, is—when measured *by* those experiences—“ultimately worth condemning” (UM2, 269/75–76). The “criterion” by which this is known is precisely the experience of being burdened in some specific ways. The old saw about being “unmotivated” to do the right thing—even when one already possesses the “law” that tells us in abstract and general terms why we should do it—is remote from and irrelevant to life. By definition Epistemologists, even Epistemologists of specifically ethical claims, can’t *care*.

Yet Nietzsche’s view is still widely misinterpreted. Upon reading his remark about the burden of history, Catherine Wilson objects that

precisely the reverse is true. The introduction of new data revitalizes exhausted lines of inquiry, and new data can be historical, in the form of facts about how people formerly lived and behaved and what they formerly thought, as well as non-historical.<sup>48</sup>

But Nietzsche is not talking about lines of inquiry. What he is arguing—and what both Rorty and Taylor understand, even if they do not always articulate it appropriately—is that “new data” cannot revitalize anything, especially not “life,” so long as the same old “historical sense” (in the case at hand, the traditional Epistemological outlook) remains in place to “burden” every effort at revitalization.



The point of my review of the “philosophy in history” debate in analytic philosophy, then, is to suggest that both *historicity itself* and the question of *how to approach the topic* are still widely mishandled.<sup>49</sup> The next three chapters begin with the first issue; the subsequent three address primarily the second. My ultimate aim is easy to state but difficult to accomplish. I want to discredit the assumption that dealing with the past is optional. In fact, we do not decide if history matters. No one thinks from scratch. To be human is to be and to remain historical, before and even after we start becoming reflective and articulate. We begin, says Taylor, immersed in a “gamut of inarticulateness,” with no truly life-transcending moves available to us. Imagine how philosophy might proceed if it started with this fact about life instead of with Epistemological (or anti-Epistemological) business as usual.

## NOTES

1. Historians and philosophers of science were among the first to break ranks with their history-vs.-philosophy brethren, in part as a result of the controversies over Thomas Kuhn’s work, but certainly in part also because it simply got too hard to deny the historically contextualized nature of scientific practice, whatever one thought of its findings and its epistemic ideals. See, e.g., Seymour Mauskopf and Tad Schmaltz, eds., *Integrating History and Philosophy of Science: Problems and Prospects* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012). In general, more perceptive histories of analytic philosophy have recently begun the task of demoting the still widely popular but largely public relations accounts written by the fundamentally anti-historical thinkers who tell us analytic philosophy began with Moore and Russell’s revolt against British Idealism. This standard story is of course both shallow and mistaken, and it has the additional disadvantage of either ignoring the connections between early analytic philosophy and phenomenology or assuming they occurred just long enough for analytic philosophers to make all the right choices and phenomenologists to make all the wrong ones. Michael Beaney is right, I think, that as a recognized specialty, the history of analytic philosophy now rivals the more established areas in the history of philosophy, certainly in terms of interest, probably in degree of willingness to rethink the old stories, but not yet in standards of scholarship (“The Historiography of Analytic Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaney [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 53–55). See also, Michael Beaney, ed., *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Erich H. Reck, ed., *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). None of this work, however, touches directly my topic. As Beaney observes, we have arrived at the point where we should say that “History of analytic philosophy is analytic philosophy come to self-consciousness” (“Historiography,” 60). My discussion starts there, by asking whether *that* is said ahistorically.
2. Tom Sorell, “On Saying No to History of Philosophy,” in *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell and G.A.J. Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” *Meditation II in Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 61. Hereafter UM2.



4. Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 25. I suspect, says Putnam, that “most of the time anyway, Rorty really thinks that [for example] metaphysical realism is *wrong* . . . but this, of course, is something he cannot admit he really thinks. I think, in short, that the attempt to say *that from a God’s-Eye View there is no God’s-Eye View* is still there, under all that [pragmatist] wrapping.”
5. This is certainly the majority view, but it has exceptions. Recently, at least one well-known philosopher and philosophical historian of the modern period has elected to swim decisively against this stream. See Tom Sorell, *Descartes Reinvented* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
6. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
7. Among the moderates, agreement or disagreement with Margaret Wilson, “History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of Sensible Qualities,” *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 191–243, reprinted in *Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (HPPT) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 455–94, has become a kind of touchstone for discussion of this issue. I cite some of the more recent comments in the following notes.
8. *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 91–108. Even Husserl is very plausibly depicted as above all a late member of that group of thinkers who sought philosophy’s “rehabilitation” by making it a science with its own special subject matter. In Husserl’s case, this rehabilitated philosophy is characterized as a “phenomenological science,” modeled after the descriptivist interpretation of physics developed by Mach and Avenarius, that engages in “research” regarding what is essentially “given” in and for consciousness once, hyper-Cartesianlike, various beliefs and claims about the existence of such phenomena have been bracketed away (87, 107).
9. René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols., new rev. ed., ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–76), AT 10:367, my emphasis; translations from John Cottingham et al., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), which includes the pagination of the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes’ *Oeuvres*.
10. On the origins of and motives for the critique of introspective (and more generally “psychological”) approaches to epistemology, see, e.g., my *Comte after Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19–35.
11. *System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, vol. 7 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 87.
12. Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and Structure of Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1938), 3–8; quotations, 5, 8. Cf. Neurath’s description of the task of “the method of logical analysis” in the famous “yellow brochure,” i.e., “The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle,” in *Otto Neurath: Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. Marie Neurath and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), 1–20, especially section 2; published simultaneously as a separate booklet. I discuss this Vienna Circle manifesto in Chapter 4.
13. Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 308. For the suggestion that logical empiricist analysis (in contrast to the postpositivist Cambridge and Oxford varieties) is “classical,” see J. O. Urmson, “The History of Philosophical Analysis [and Discussion],” in *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 294–311.



14. *Discourse*, AT 6:9. Successful “physics,” as Descartes already saw, is mathematical physics. Sorell suggests that this point is so well known today that it actually undermines Descartes’ insistence on the need for starting his reformation of reasoning with a skepticism concerning the senses. For today, “to the extent that people are able to enter into the current natural scientific conception of the world at all, they must be mathematically trained” (*Descartes Reinvented*, 168).
15. This idea is certainly not new. I myself know it to have been occasionally stated but noisily ignored as early as the late 1960s. See, e.g., Graham Bird’s remarks about the (unconsciously ironic) self-description of mid-century analytic philosophers as having effected a “revolution” in philosophy—including his observation that, in connection with the allegedly new conception of the relation between philosophy and science, “it is interesting . . . to see how the revolutionary doctrine, although apparently opposed to the Cartesian picture [of this relation], in the end seems to resolve into it” (*Philosophical Tasks* [London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972], 41). The locus classicus for statements of this doctrine is the famous little collection, A.J. Ayer, ed., *The Revolution in Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1956).
16. See, e.g., references to HPPT in several of the essays in the Sorell and Rogers collection, *Analytic Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*. Yet even what I am calling her decidedly moderate stand is too much for some. Catherine Wilson, who writes extensively on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy and who produced a 2003 commentary on the *Meditations*, thinks Margaret Wilson overvalues the philosophical worth of the history of philosophy. In “Is History Good for Philosophy?” Catherine Wilson argues that historians probably have more to learn from scientists and philosophers than the reverse (Sorell and Rogers, 61–82; quote, 74), and she expresses doubts that, e.g., “the student who understands the Putnam paper [on brains in a vat] well but has never heard of the evil demon has a *philosophical* . . . as opposed to a *cultural* deficit” (75, my emphasis). One would like to hear from the author an explanation of this distinction between culture and philosophy—and above all, an account of how she “knows” to make it.
17. HPPT, 200/459. In her own famous Descartes commentary, Wilson points out that one purpose of the book is to expose misinterpretations that anachronistic readings of his work had produced, and she takes pride in the fact that in organizing the work, she did not capitulate to those readers who expected that any such study would rightly begin by “evaluating Descartes’ system in relation to the powerful anti-Cartesian currents” of the day (*Descartes* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978], vii–viii, 221–23; also HPPT, 200/484 n. 23).
18. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 10.
19. HPPT, 204/462. Cf. Catherine Wilson’s assertion that, although historians of philosophy may have the “discipline-centering” function of retracing the sources of the “philosophical schemata” we “non-historians” use in our work, “Arguably, [we] should leave the history of philosophy for the most part to the specialist, and give over the time saved to contact with the natural and social sciences” (“Is History Good for Philosophy?” 65).
20. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8–13. Hereafter, PIH and the “PIH editors.” This pioneering work certainly revived interest in the issue, but it would be a serious overstatement to say it every disappeared entirely from Anglophone philosophy. See, e.g., John Macmurray, “Concerning the History of Philosophy [Inaugural Address],” *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 25 (1951): 1–24.



21. Robert Piercey makes the same mistake from another angle. He thinks he can avoid the forced option between doing history and doing philosophy by employing John Herman Randall's "genetic method" to "illuminate" contemporary thought. His result is entirely predictable: He sees social science as doing "the same sort of thing" as biology—i.e., static and dynamic studies of a seed or a society are equally aimed at learning what its "structures" are capable of doing in action (*The Uses of the Past from Heidegger to Rorty: Doing Philosophy Historically* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 15–19; quote 18)—and he thinks that by "importing" this model into philosophy he can "understand its objects," too (19–20). In spite of citations from Gadamer, PIH, and the allegedly like-minded Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Piercey entirely misses the point of their concern for "historicity." It has nothing to do with creating general "pictures" of how everything hangs together, rather than focusing on the specific "theories" and arguments that presuppose a picture, and it certainly has nothing to do with practicing the kind of "meta-philosophical" reconstruction of the creation and development of such pictures that Piercey calls "doing philosophy historically" (23–24). Their problem—at least in the case of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—is that we find *ourselves* living in the midst of an inherited, deeply embedded but distressingly inappropriate sense of philosophical self-understanding. One of the central features of this distress is the powerful but often experientially unwelcome influence on our thinking of the idea that we are most ourselves precisely when we imagine that it is possible for us to take the stance of a "scientifically" oriented, disengaged, neutral consciousnesses—devoted, like Piercey, to such projects as conceptualizing "the" structure, function, and development of "objects" *outside ourselves*. As I argue shortly, Rorty's approach to philosophy's past to some extent resembles Piercey's, insofar as he too gives no reflective account of his own orientation when he moves to depict how other thinkers are "in" history and how their inheritance of tradition got them that way. The difference between thinking of ourselves as being "in" history and our actually "being historical" is the central topic in Heidegger's SZ, chapter 5, division 2.
22. Robert C. Sleight, *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2–3, my emphasis. I pick Sleight here in part because he is cited with approval by Wilson (HPPT, 208/486 n. 39). For a generally balanced review of the arguments for philosophical "progress," see Anthony Kenny, "The Philosopher's History and the History of Philosophy," in Sorell and Rogers, 14–20. About Kenny's discussion, however, one can still raise the same question; the actual achievement of his ideal contemporary standpoint—i.e., one that would avoid both historical superficiality and presentism—is not discussed.
23. These matters are discussed initially in "Philosophy in America Today," in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 211–16; see also "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," PIH, 56 n. 4, 66–67 (reprinted with minor changes in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 247–73). At first, Rorty makes Quine and Sellars the prime dismantlers of logical positivism's revolutionary image (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], part 2). In the 1980s, Davidson is added as a third (see, e.g., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], part 2; and *Truth and Progress*, 19–42). Since the late 1970s, Rorty has held that the twentieth century's three "most important" philosophers



- are Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and (ever more emphatically) Dewey. See, e.g., “A Pragmatist View of Contemporary Analytic Philosophy,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 133–46; and in this regard the still-current commentaries in David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); and Henry Saatkamp, ed. *Rorty and Pragmatism* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995).
24. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53. The distinction between literal and metaphorical language is not a distinction between the representatively true and the merely poetic. It is, rather, a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar ways of using “noises and marks”; hence, we have to get over the idea that the world can “provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors” (17, 20). Rorty is increasingly “dismissive” of analytic philosophy (*Truth and Progress*, 11) because it will not give up its Platonic-scientistic faith in establishing that some of our noises and marks are True Representations of the way things are. His later view is nicely showcased in his debate with Pascal Engel (Rorty and Engel, *What’s the Use of Truth?* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007]) and “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy,” in *Cultural Politics*, 120–30, but it is foreshadowed in his earlier efforts to reduce the differences between analytic and Continental philosophy to “agendas” and makes them functions of a fundamentally “political split” between two “cultures” (*Consequences*, 229).
  25. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 75–76, my emphasis. Cf. *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 68–72.
  26. Quoted in full, the passage runs, “Rorty hopes to be a doctor to the modern soul. (2) At the same time, Rorty’s analytic past shows up in this: when he rejects a philosophical controversy, as, for example, he rejects the “realism/antirealism” controversy, or the “emotive/cognitive” controversy, his rejection is expressed in a Carnapian tone of voice—he *scorns* the controversy” (Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990], 20). For the details, see my *Comte after Positivism*, 193–97. Richard J. Bernstein’s version of this same criticism, specifically in relation to Rorty’s recent defense of liberalism, is to hear in this defense the voice of someone who is delivering a “lay sermon.” See “Rorty’s Inspirational Liberalism,” in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 124–38; quote, 137).
  27. “Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21; cf. “Twenty-five Years After,” in *The Linguistic Turn*, 374 n. 9; and “Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 307–26.
  28. *Consequences*, xxxvii; author’s emphasis altered. Does “playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other” constitute a “method”?
  29. “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude,” in *Cultural Politics*, 85. In fact, he says, “talk of universal validity simply a way of dramatizing the need for intersubjective agreement” (85).
  30. “Philosophy and Its history,” in PIH, 17–30. Phrasing cited from “Overcoming Epistemology,” in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 466–69, hereafter also cited as reprinted with minor changes in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3–5. See also Taylor, PIH, 28–30, and his *Sources of the Self: The Making*



- of the *Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 8. For a good summary of Taylor's view of both the Epistemological standpoint and his proposal for displacing it, see "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, ed. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 304–14.
31. "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition," in *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (and Beyond)*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 257–75, quote, 273, my emphasis. For a later restatement of this argument, see "Rorty and Philosophy," in Guignon and Hiley, 158–80.
  32. Taylor's source for this idea is in part Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the embodied self and in still larger part Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world in *Being and Time*. See, e.g., "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26–49; and "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 202–21.
  33. "Philosophy and Its History," PIH, 27–28, my emphasis.
  34. "Overcoming Epistemology," 479–80/14. As we will see in Chapter 7, the resemblance of this process to what the young Heidegger calls destructive retrieval is striking, although Heidegger has more to say about the process of transformation that Taylor does.
  35. See, respectively, "The Dialogical Self," 304–14; "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," *Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 3 (1971): 3–51, reprinted in *Philosophical Papers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2:15–57; and "Reply to Clifford Geertz," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 233–36.
  36. "Overcoming Epistemology," 483/17, my emphasis. It should be understood that I am giving a very thin account of Taylor's rich and detailed critical evaluation of the so-called Enlightenment Project. For a good summary, see Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 201–14.
  37. It is easy to be impressed by the degree to which Taylor's own alternative to Epistemology contrasts starkly with the many problematic elements of the earlier position. See, e.g., Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Taylor's (Anti-) Epistemology," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52–83. What I question here, however, is Taylor's understanding of the interpretive process of getting from the latter to the former.
  38. "Overcoming Epistemology," 484/17. Cf. *Sources of the Self*, where Taylor makes the more nuanced claim that this neo-Nietzschean position over-emphasizes what is only one "strain" in Nietzsche's own writing (487–88, 518–19).
  39. Taylor develops the same kind of argument in his sympathetic, though not uncritical, account of Hegel's "historical dialectics," identifying it there as part of his general defense of "interpretive" accounts of human activities, in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 217.
  40. "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition," 271–72, my emphasis. Taylor's critique of the "ontologizing of the detached perspective" can be found, for example, in "Engaged Agency," 204–10. I ignore in this discussion what numerous others have criticized (and what I see as another effect of Taylor's lingering attraction to traditional epistemology), viz., his willingness to



- distinguish natural and human sciences virtually as natural kinds, based on the idea that the former are indeed at least roughly what traditional epistemology has made of them, while only the latter need take into account the “self-interpreting” nature of its “objects.” For a recent critique, see Joseph Rouse, “Interpretation in Natural and Human Science,” in Hiley et al., 42–56.
41. “Philosophy and Its History,” PIH, 23. Cf. “Engaged Agency,” 210–14.
  42. In fact, there are other places in Taylor’s work where he is much more critical of Habermas, perhaps because he feels free to comment entirely on Habermas, rather than to play him off against another view (i.e., that of the neo-Nietzscheans) which also has part of the story right. For example, in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor explains that Habermas’ kind of modified defense of Enlightenment rationality—even though it embraces a pluralism of theoretical, practical, and expressive sense-making—inevitably has the effect of alienating us from the experiential context of these sense-makings in two important ways. First, Habermas’ stress on the objective, the public, and the agreed-upon tends to denigrate and cut us off from that order of traditional and extranatural “moral sources” that lie “outside” the individual subject but that nevertheless, through language, “resonate within” us (*Sources*, 509–10). Second, Habermas’ continuing attempt to give some sort of epistemological justification for a core set of human values pushes him, as he puts it elsewhere, toward a “discourse of moral authority” that speaks as if it had the right to say, “Kindly take your various religious, metaphysical, and ethical conceptions and keep them out of the way of the Declaration of Rights which we hereby ground” (“Reply to Clifford Geertz,” 248).
  43. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1983), §522:283. See also, §§470–80, 521, and 580–81.
  44. Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply to My Critics,” in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. John B. Thompson and David Held (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 219–83; quote, 250, author’s emphasis.
  45. In employing Whitman and Dewey to “create an image of America” to reinvigorate a hopeful, activist Left against what he sees as the moralistically knowing spectator Left of the post-Vietnam era, Rorty argues that he deliberately says “image” rather than “myth” or “ideology,” because the latter terms would be meaningful only if it were possible to contrast his kind of story with an “objective” one. But “nobody knows,” he says, “what it would be like to try to be objective . . . We raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become” (*Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 11, my emphasis; also 75–107). It should be noted, however, that Rorty’s opposition to absolutes is not some sort of neo-Humean move as critics like Michael Williams often assume. See, e.g., “Rorty on Knowledge and Truth,” in *Rorty*, ed. Guignon and Hiley, 61–80. I agree with Rorty that absolutism and relativism need each other and are part of the same (Epistemological) game—as are realism and anti-realism. My objection to his position is not that Rorty fails to somehow “defend” his particular decisions but that neither “we” nor “the process of deciding” is critically evaluated.
  46. There is, one may note, no reference to any such measurement in Taylor’s recent discussions—in, e.g., *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)—of how the postmodern world is going to live through both the religious and scientific impulses we have inherited. There, the point is to refuse everywhere to enter into the “dialectic” between secularism and authoritative faiths, theism and atheism, individualism and communalism,



etc., by staying within the circumstances to which we already know both poles are inadequate responses.

47. “How to Become What You Are” is, of course, the famous subtitle of *Ecce Homo* (*The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley et al. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 69–152). One would obviously be dense to criticize this “statement,” on the grounds that “logic” warns us that it confuses two tenses. See, e.g., Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), especially chap. 6, “How One Becomes What One Is,” 170–99.
48. “Is History Good for Philosophy?” Sorell and Rogers, 78. Wilson seems not to understand that in the title of Nietzsche’s essay “*Historie*” refers to the discipline itself and its topic, and the point of discussing the subject is to determine how it matters “*für das Leben*.”
49. So, e.g., none of the arguments initiated by the PIH editors and traced out here will feel especially telling to anyone for whom it is just obvious that “‘doing philosophy’ refers to the practice of forging arguments for and against the truth of theses in the domains of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so on” and that “doing the history of philosophy” is “discovering arguments for and against” some historical figure appears to have believed (Ryan Nichols, “Why Is the History of Philosophy Worth Our Study?” *Metaphilosophy* 37, no. 1 [2006]: 34–52; cited 34).



## Part I Introduction

# Doing Philosophy Historically versus Being Philosophically Historical

Even in cursory retrospect it is clear that over the last 150 years, when it comes to the issue of how history matters to philosophy, the two strains of modern philosophy have had and are leaving very different legacies. As suggested in Chapter 1, philosophers in the empiricist-positivist strain—even those who now admit that the study of philosophy’s past is sometimes worthwhile—still tend to believe that history matters very little to the current pursuit of “genuine” (i.e., up-to-date) philosophy. In their heart of hearts, they still think that “we” know how to do philosophy, and “they” were at best only able to approximate it. What, after all, is the alternative? That someone in the past knew how to do philosophy better? Hence even “doing philosophy historically,” as the popular phrase now has it, is conceived as a matter of choice—and a second, less prestigious one at that.

In Part I, I organize my discussion against the background legacy of this empiricist-positivist strain of modern (later, “analytic,” or even more confidently, with no adjective) philosophers, precisely in order to show that their assumption—namely, that history matters to philosophy only optionally and non-essentially—is both problematic in relation to their own philosophical outlook and false as a thesis about at least three traditional figures who are usually thought to share their assumption.

By contrast, philosophers in the rationalist-idealist strain of modern (later, “continental” rather than “analytic”) philosophy typically assume that history does matter—or at least that the study of its past is somehow integral to its present pursuit. Sometimes it is even assumed that this study helps with one’s own philosophizing. In Part II, I organize my discussion against this second background legacy.

Rather than survey this second legacy in general, however, I begin with the conclusions reached in Chapter 4 about how, contrary to the standard accounts, history matters to and in the thought of Comte. To be sure, he handles this matter in a way that after him, this aspect of his thinking seemed easy to regard as superfluous so that it eventually became invisible—thus leaving us with precisely the “problem of history” that becomes central to Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. I argue that the three of them taken together—in



this order, but at the same time in shamelessly Heideggerian retrospect—map out the possibility of understanding not just the option of doing philosophy historically if one cares to, but *how history necessarily does matter to any current philosophizing, whether it cares to reflect on this or not.*<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

1. The question of the historicity of philosophy actually is not a fundamental issue for all recent continental thinkers, and in making it so, I am taking sides in a dispute. As the young Heidegger stresses, his own mentor failed to consider the issue properly and thus initially misunderstood Dilthey's conception of historical life and never saw its full implications. Husserl's famous *Logos* article may be more stridently ahistorical than his later works, but no one can argue that he ultimately became a Gadamerian hermeneut or that he ever repudiated the following excerpt. Of course, he said, the great philosophies can inspire us, but

it is not through philosophies that we become philosophers. Remaining immersed in the historical, forcing oneself to work therein in historico-critical activity, and wanting to attain philosophical science by means of eclectic elaboration or anachronistic renaissance—all that leads to nothing but hopeless efforts. . . . Philosophy is essentially a science of true beginnings, or origins . . . [and] it must not rest until it has attained its own absolutely clear beginnings, i.e., its absolutely clear problems, the methods pre-indicated in the proper sense of these problems, and the most basic field of work wherein things are given with absolute clarity (PRS, 196).

For Heidegger, as I show, by the time one has taken up a philosophical position that imagines that we must “force ourselves” to “remain immersed in the historical,” all hope of understanding historicity—including the historicity of this position—has disappeared.



## 2 Socrates Contra Platonism

### On the “Success” of Aporetic Inquiry

To recover a sense of how history matters to philosophy—that is, what it is to “be” a philosopher, always from somewhere, never from nowhere—I begin with Socrates. In spite of appearances, I believe that with him—perhaps even above all for him—this question is never far from his thoughts. Of course, in Plato’s dialogues, “being historical” is never an explicit topic, like justice, beauty, courage, and the rest. Indeed, the very idea is usually taken to be a relatively modern notion, so that it seems natural to assume that Socrates could not have been concerned with it. I want to show that this assumption is mistaken. “Being historical,” in Nietzsche’s sense, is really not a modern notion—something that can be appreciated only by someone who starts thinking in the midst of a two-thousand-year-old tradition. In this chapter, I argue that when Socrates associates his love of wisdom with having always “been an Athenian,” this is just as much an acknowledgement of his historicity as any acknowledgment we might make today. My “Athenian” Socrates is largely absent from recent Anglophone commentary; but this is a very loud absence, and understanding the reasons for it will make it easier for us to find him.

What sort of Socrates does appear in recent English-language commentary? He is a familiar figure—a philosopher who employs a Socratic method, who argues, makes claims, and holds theories. In short, he is someone who thinks and acts like a contemporary analytic philosopher.<sup>1</sup> This description is obviously anachronistic, but it dominates the secondary literature—even that of Gregory Vlastos and his followers, who famously stress the importance of historical scholarship in getting the figure of Socrates right.<sup>2</sup>

One consequence of interpreting Socrates in this anachronistic way is that it makes the early dialogues seem—as they say—deeply “puzzling.” Indeed, it is often said that Socrates seems to be the locus of many “paradoxes.”<sup>3</sup> He denies being a teacher, yet claims it is his divine duty to inform people of their ignorance. He describes himself as a seeker of wisdom, but he spends most of his time mercilessly exposing the unwisdom of others. Incredibly, he seems to believe that people never choose what they know is bad but always what they think is good, and he seems to believe that “virtue is knowledge”—thus intellectualistically ignoring the obvious human



facts of strong emotion, moral weakness, and seat-of-the-pants reasoning. Yet however strange may seem his doctrines and his treatment of others, stranger still seems Socrates' own life. For according to the virtually unanimous reports, he both lived virtuously and happily—and also lacked the knowledge that is supposed to make this possible.<sup>4</sup> How can this be? How can existential success go hand-in-hand with philosophical failure? How, for example, can Socrates claim to act justly at his trial when he denies knowing what justice is? And how can he question people so confidently and perceptively about piety, or courage, or beauty, when he is himself really ignorant of these things?

It is this last alleged paradox that I want to focus on here. How can Socrates be both virtuous and ignorant? If he is either one of these, how can he also be the other? In most English-language commentary, this paradox constitutes the primary model for the way “the Socratic paradoxes” are said to appear in Plato's early writings.<sup>5</sup> But so, I believe, do they only appear. In my view, the Socratic dialogues present us, quite unparadoxically, with episodes of success in an entirely successful life. I will discuss this issue in two parts, followed by a brief conclusion that ties my interpretation of Socrates to the previous chapter.

First, I argue that if Socratic inquiry often seems to us to be metaphysically unsatisfying or epistemologically paradoxical, this may tell us more about ourselves and our post-Socratic inheritance than about Socrates, who reports experiencing no such misgivings. The problem is really an artifact of the “Platonic” (in Rorty's, not Plato's sense) nature of analytic interpretations of Socratic inquiry. Their tendency is to understand ignorance and wisdom as if they were two decontextualized mental states, themselves to be analyzed by a decontextualized mind that sees everything as a matter of applying a method, producing arguments, and justifying theories.

Second, I explain how the main features of the Socratic dialogues—the confessions of ignorance, the elenctic style, the aporetic conclusions—are signs of Socrates' *success*, not signs of paradox or deviousness or failure for which generous interpreters now compensate by turning him into a pioneer for some activity approved of today. So, for example, his confessions of ignorance spring neither from the experience of a failure to possess some species of we would now call “knowledge,” nor from a strong commitment to “free inquiry,” nor from a desire to model a self-actualizing life style. Rather, they signal Socrates' recognition that beneath the surface of our beliefs and theories, there runs what he calls “life” and I call—with Heidegger's help—a *vital understanding* that grounds and guides all our specific inquiries and activities and is in turn influenced by them. It is precisely this “life,” or vital understanding, that defies so many post-Socratic classifications. It is not and is not structured like a fundamental belief or theory, or a set of beliefs or theories. Rather, it is a kind of general orientation toward and global *sense* of things (what the Heidegger of *Being and Time* calls understanding “worldliness”). It is this global understanding that



gives Socrates' statements and actions their family resemblance as belonging to a single outlook, but one that can never itself be directly subjected to total intellectual scrutiny or chosen in a moment of utterly resolute and self-possessed freedom.

My conclusion will be that Socrates is successful in what he does precisely because for him, philosophizing is “examining life”—that is, continually but indirectly improving the condition of his vital understanding. For Socrates, philosophy has not yet become what it mostly is for us—namely, a project one takes over by conscious decision and aspires to practice in accordance with a generalizing methodology that shows us how to arrive at clear definitions and warranted sets of assertions. In the last hours of his life, Socrates tells Crito that more than anything, he now wants to reconsider the question of whether it is ever all right to be unjust—because due to the results of his trial, his circumstances have changed dramatically since they last examined the matter. When the ensuing conversation prompts Socrates to conclude that he cannot flee because, after all, “I am an Athenian,” he is only reaffirming what a life of dialogue has made plain to him—namely, that loving wisdom can only be practiced by a determinately situated thinker, ever anew, and not by a decontextualized mind, for a definite end.

## SOCRATIC “PHILOSOPHY”

How, then, should we interpret this “lover of wisdom.” Typically, analytic philosophers have approached this issue in terms of one or both of the following questions. (1) Given that Socrates often seems to make specific claims about the topic at hand, what—substantively—does he really know? And (2) given that his confessions of ignorance always lead to his questioning others, how—methodologically—does he proceed? The trouble is, these questions really cannot get us anywhere. Even the most generous and sympathetic answers present us at best with a modern colleague-in-the-making—that is, a proto-metaphysician looking for definitions, an epistemologist applying a method for inquiry, and an inspiring personality. Moreover, none of this solves the apparent paradox of the virtuous man who is ignorant of virtue.

## Socrates’ “Knowledge”?

After decades of close reading, commentators are still unable to produce a list of settled claims to essential knowledge from the Socratic dialogues. Granted, Socrates sometimes asks for definitions and sometimes even proposes one himself, but strictly *Socratic* answers to the “What is X?” question are nowhere to be found. Moreover, the *Apology*’s view of us all as “worth nothing in respect to wisdom” is so obviously genuine that commentators tend



to move eventually either to the later, more Platonic dialogues where one seems to find a theory of ideas, a philosophical doctrine, a clear outlook—in short, claims and arguments ready for contemporary testing—or to the conclusion that what is important about Socrates is not what he “believes,” but his “method” and his influence on others.

In the middle of the last century, a few commentators tried to delay the inevitable by suggesting that when it comes to knowledge, Socrates is easier to please than Plato. Robinson, for example, argues that only with Plato do Socratic questions come to require real, or essential definitions that give universal characteristics for kinds of X, whereas Socrates himself mostly settles for “convertible descriptions” that identify things in a relatively informal, non-metaphysical fashion.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Ross distinguishes Socrates’ search for “immanent” common natures, where each search is limited to some particular issue at hand, from Plato’s “transcendental view of ideas as entities existing on their own account”—a view that Ross thinks Plato is forced to develop in order to explicate the “general significance” of what Socrates merely begins.<sup>7</sup> More recently, studies of Socrates’ alleged religious convictions have been used in this spirit as well.<sup>8</sup>

But such waterings-down and religionings-up of an essentialist conception of knowledge do not make Socrates’ own philosophical activity appear any more successful. In fact, these strategies ultimately benefit Plato, not Socrates. Thus Robinson thinks Socratic elenchus “involved persistent hypocrisy; it showed a negative and destructive spirit; it caused pain to its victims,” and it therefore has its primary merit in being “the means by which the irrational and accidental individual is brought to the appreciation of universal science.”<sup>9</sup> Ross, too, regards Socrates’ allegedly more practical interest in “defining one thing at a time” as the mere “first step” on the road to Plato and Aristotle. And although McPherran speaks throughout of Socrates’ “moral theory” and his “views” on such things as the nature of the soul, as a “developmentalist” who sees the early dialogues in terms of what Plato held when, he concludes with references to Plato’s “debt” to Socrates, not with any theories and views of Socrates himself. Some commentators have pointed to all this evidence of Socrates’ substantive failures as implicitly undermining even Plato’s attempts to convince us of even the preliminary value of the elenchus as a style of inquiry.<sup>10</sup> It is against this sort of background that Vlastos develops his defense of Socrates as a separate and separately admirable kind of philosopher.

Here, put bluntly, is the issue Vlastos sees. On the one hand, it is no real defense of Socrates’ own examined life to say his best student’s metaphysics would have been impossible without it. On the other hand, even if one wants to hold that Socrates did have some kind of knowledge, there are always and at every turn those confessions of ignorance. Vlastos sees Gould is an early example of the line of commentators who try to rescue a “knowledgeable” Socrates by arguing that what he really wants is a practical “knowing-how” not a theoretical-empirical “knowing-that.” But of course the texts say



no such thing. Socrates claims possession of neither, and Gould winds up implausibly describing knowing-how as nothing more than a “sense of ability to act” that “remains a purely subjective ‘faith’ which comes out only in action.”<sup>11</sup> West, too, talks on the one hand of a “Socratic political philosophy” that seems to present itself as an alternative to the “ominous tribalism growing throughout the Western world,” but concludes on the other hand that Socrates is guilty of the formal charges against him because he fails to provide Athens with a positive teaching, grounded in “reason,” to replace the tradition he gets people to doubt.<sup>12</sup> Kahn thinks Socrates is quite simply using “trickery” to refute Polus in the *Gorgias* (474c–475c).<sup>13</sup> And Santas, who is eager to avoid the conclusion that Socrates is “trying to show that it is impossible to define anything,” combs all the early dialogues for definitions Socrates himself offers and accepts; but he is able to find just nine, and even these are either trivial “examples of the sorts of definitions he wants” or merely “correct definitions which he uses as premises” in particular discussions. In the end, Santas cannot do anything to correct the perhaps “not entirely unreasonable” impression of an unsatisfied and unsatisfiable Socrates.<sup>14</sup>

In short, Vlastos sees that behind all the debates over Socrates’ theories, definitions, beliefs, and claims lurks the haunting suggestion that “Socratic *knowledge*,” however identified, may be a misnomer. What Socrates left us is unanswered *questions*. Speaking out of another tradition, Friedländer is perfectly willing to say that Socrates’ own life may be the only possible answer to these questions.<sup>15</sup> To most Anglophone readers including Vlastos, however, this is epistemologically unsatisfying. What good can hand-wavings at “his life” do the rest of us? What is to keep his dialogues from shrinking into “negative and destructive” exercises that merely await being, in West’s deflationary phrase, “transmogrified by the healing power of [Plato’s] craft”?<sup>16</sup> Even Nehamas, who wants to defend a variant of Friedländer’s view, admits that the price of benefiting from Socrates’ unfathomable “silence” (about how he did what he did) is that we must reject “his idea that the examined life . . . is the best life for all human beings” and instead “emulate the structure of his project without accepting the particular shape he gave his own life.”<sup>17</sup> Analytic philosophers have not jumped to embrace Nehamas’ solution. The “structure of his project” is at bottom no more epistemologically satisfying than “his life.” Hence, it has been loudly wondered whether Nehamas’ solution is really “philosophical” at all.<sup>18</sup> Bad enough not to find any Socratic beliefs; worse, if the Socratic life is only one of our “creative” options.

No, if there is a “Socratic” philosophy, and if he did not bequeath to us any substantive doctrines, then his positive legacy—if, of course, there is a positive legacy at all—must consist in his discovery of a philosophical method. It is no accident that so many commentators, wishing neither to simply debunk Socrates nor reduce him to someone else’s inspiration, have turned their attention to the conduct of his conversations rather than their content.



### Socrates' "Method"?

At first glance, turning a modern epistemological eye toward Socrates' dialogical procedure may not seem a very promising approach to the question of his success. Indeed, until twentieth-century philosophers made it a central issue, the formalization of the elenchus was rarely attempted. Yet as Guthrie observes, long before any serious efforts at formalization, readers did try to imagine how it might already be a fully satisfying life to follow Socrates in ceaselessly "bring[ing] home to men their intellectual need, and then invit[ing] them to join with him in the search for truth by the dialectical method of question and answer."<sup>19</sup>

By the middle of the last century, however, the pressure to make philosophy more "scientific" had become too strong to let this sort of old-fashioned "humanities" imagery—that is, of philosophy as a way of life—stand. If Socrates, rather than just Plato, is to have canonical importance, it cannot be found in anything personal like confessions of ignorance or anything well-meaning but vague like bringing home to others "their intellectual need." Sometimes, philosophers of science would speak in this tone of voice to the larger public. Popper, for example, praises the early Platonic dialogues for giving testimony to Socrates' "faith in human reason." He even laments Plato's later supposed "betrayal" of this faith. But in fact, Popper only admires Socratic faith because he confuses it with the very different and very modern "critical rationality" he thinks is fundamental to science, and even if we grant for argument's sake that his logic of refutation might make for better physics, it does not help turn any souls around.

The ultimate reduction of Popper's position is, perhaps, the Vienna Circle's triumphant conclusion that with the logical empiricists' rational reconstruction of the method of science, we have finally found, as Reichenbach puts it, an "adequate expression" of Socratic *maieutics*.<sup>20</sup> To be fair, however, even Hegel, in awarding world-historical significance to Socrates' practice of confessing ignorance, is really paying no more favor to Socrates or his confessions than Popper or Reichenbach. Hegel's point is that with Socrates came the emergence of a very Hegelian but very un-Socratic "principle of subjective freedom" that allegedly plays a key role in the historical unfolding of Absolute Spirit.<sup>21</sup> In short, we should be equally suspicious of those who now praise Socrates alleged Method and of those who try to find some Truth in what he allegedly "claims." Too often, this is really just a sign of post-Socratic beliefs being celebrated at his expense.

With this cautionary note in mind, we may now ask if anyone has found a construal of Socrates' "method" that can rescue his dialogues from their apparent paradox. Of course, any answer must show us how to undercut the forced option between knowing and not knowing. Distinguishing "two kinds" of knowledge does not help.<sup>22</sup> For as long as one imagines Socrates either has or does not have knowledge, period, full stop, his confessions of ignorance can only be one of three equally unsatisfactory things. Either (i) they are literally



correct, or (ii) literally incorrect, (iii) or some sort of unspoken equivocation. Option (i) makes his virtuousness a problem; (ii) and (iii) make his dialogical irony problematic. Before the work of Vlastos, Guthrie probably spoke for a majority of English-speaking commentators in trying to sidestep this logical point by saying Socrates' irony is, in some positive but puzzling way, just a function of his philosophically sincere and non-sophistic disclaimers.<sup>23</sup> Guthrie knew, however, that some remained embarrassed by Socrates' apparent "slyness" (Robinson) and felt the need defend him against appearances by linking confession more firmly with educational purposes.<sup>24</sup> Others simply bit the bullet and, like Hackforth, called Socrates' disclaimers of cosmological knowledge—for example, at his trial (*Apology*, 19c)—an outright lie. Still others (e.g., typically, students of Leo Strauss) objected to Socrates' confessional practice as politically destructive.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, post-Vlastos, Forster has reviewed the secondary literature on Socratic confession and concluded that it still falls into roughly the same categories. As Forster puts it, we are left with three unsatisfactory pictures of (a) a "sly" or "disingenuous" Socrates who either lures opponents into refutable positions or sandbags until it is time to embarrass them with his superior knowledge, (b) a Socrates who sets the standards for "knowledge" so high that he must always remain a perpetual student, and (c) a "skeptical" Socrates who assumes that attaining justifiable true belief is impossible and thus sees his job primarily as one of "dispelling the false conceit of knowledge in others" (1–2). Forster's own suggestion, however, is equally dependent on the underlying assumptions embedded in these three kinds of account, insofar as he accepts literally the idea that since Socrates' Apollonian conception of human knowledge is "worth little or nothing," this must mean that he has no ethical *knowledge*. Forster concludes that since Socrates nevertheless seems to have numerous ethical *beliefs*, this can only mean that Socrates has a "divine source" for these beliefs and is therefore someone "whom we may as well, for alliteration's sake, call Socrates the saint" (2). Forster claims in a footnote that his position is less anachronistic than Vlastos' because it does not rest on modern assumptions about the "natural opposition" between rational argument and religious faith. What he does not say, however, is that his "defense" of Socrates is purchased at the price of reducing him to a historical specimen, precisely because everybody now accepts this opposition. Since "we" today have abandoned the "religious world-view" Socrates presupposes, says Forster, "we" are unlikely to find his position "philosophically attractive"; and besides, it rests on the "fatally flawed" assumption that ethical knowledge must (and "of course" cannot) depend on essential definitions. Having confined Socrates within all this familiar contemporary machinery, Forster concludes, with the arrogant generosity still quite typical of analytic philosophers who have "decided" to study philosophy's past, that we can at least say his position still has "considerable historical interest," and we can look to it "for the light that it promises to shed on *Plato's* position."<sup>26</sup>



In short, all of these maneuvers either simply compound the problem or push us away from Socrates and toward Plato. Indeed, they even add to the problem by assuming that we can explain what Socrates thinks he is doing for *himself* by saying something about the effect he has or intends to have on *others*. Socrates does say that he can have a positive effect on his fellow Athenians, but the question remains, is the Socrates who has this effect a possessor of knowledge or not? Either way, says Vlastos, the paradox remains:

[N]o man ever breathed greater assurance that his feet were planted firmly on the path of right. He never voices a doubt of the moral rightness of any of his acts or decisions, never betrays a sense of sin. He goes to his death confident that “no evil thing can happen to a good man” (*Apology* 41d)—that “good man” is himself. Can this be the same man who believes that no one can be good without knowledge, and that he has no knowledge?<sup>27</sup>

For several decades, Vlastos forced the scholarly world to face this question, and both answers to his question and efforts to avoid the question still tend to take his basic approach for granted. Hence, it is his answers and the philosophical approach that underlies them that I want to consider in detail.

## THE CASE OF VLASTOS

Vlastos offers both an earlier and also a somewhat different later explanation of the Socratic paradox. Yet the two accounts are deeply related and in the end, both are open to the same criticism, namely, that they owe too much to the twentieth-century philosophical orientation out of which they are fashioned.

According to Vlastos’ *earlier account*, when the mature (i.e., post-Delphic) Socrates denies having “knowledge,” he is using the term in a strongly “rational,” or “deductive” sense that can be traced back to Parmenides. The claim to “know” something in this sense “implies the conviction that any further investigation of its truth would be superfluous” (VPS, 10). Hence, what Socrates is really saying with his confessions is that “any conviction he has stands ready to be re-examined in the company of any sincere [not other sorts of?] person who will raise the question and join him in the investigation.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, at any given moment Socrates of course has convictions, but because he is always measuring them against a logico-deductive model of knowing, he is forever treating them as “tentative” rather than permanent possessions.

On the face of it, the general line of argument might seem harmless enough. It is hard to quarrel with Vlastos’ characterization of the real human Socrates as a studiously undogmatic searcher who is at least as hard on himself as he is on others and who is always aware of falling short of



deductive certainty. What makes Vlastos interesting is that, apart from this, his earlier explanation gives us little more. He offers no account of what it is like for Socrates to *be* a seeker and undogmatic philosopher. He does not explain clearly whether Socrates uses his “Parmenidean” standard positively (as a measure of what he actually seeks) or negatively (as a measure of what he cannot have). In fact, no sooner has he praised Socrates as an undogmatic seeker than he begins to accuse him of being so obsessed with the Parmenidean model of knowledge that he fails to appreciate how an “empirical” study of human nature might have corrected the intellectualist excesses of his moral vision. Of such empirical study, says Vlastos, Socrates understood little, and as a result

he paid for his ignorance by conceit of knowledge, failing to understand the limitations of his knowledge of fact generally, and of the fact of knowledge in particular. Had he so much as felt the need of investigating knowledge itself as a fact of human nature, to determine just exactly what, as a matter of fact, happens to a man when he has or hasn’t knowledge, Socrates might have come to see that even his own dauntless courage in the face of death he owed not to knowledge but to something else, more akin to religious faith.<sup>29</sup>

This criticism is so deliberately presented, and yet so painfully un-Socratic in its inspiration, that we would do well to ask why Vlastos should feel constrained to make it. Even at this time, when he is still making Socrates’ failure to reach certainty the basis of his disclaimers, Vlastos admits that his whole line of interpretation rests upon the conviction that philosophers like Parmenides sought what we “now-a-days” call “deductive knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> Even by itself, this claim is far from self-evident. More importantly in this context, however, it permits Vlastos to read back into the dialogues of Socrates epistemological distinctions between deductive thinking, empirical reasoning, and “faith” that are all too clearly ours, not his.

Viewing the dialogues from this contemporary angle, Vlastos can of course be full of praise for Socrates’ opposition to philosophical dogmatism and authoritarianism, since Vlastos himself believes we need something like (Socrates’?) “intellectual freedom” in logic, science, and moral inquiry. But with the modern trinity of deductive reasoning, empirical-scientific research, and religious faith fixed squarely before his eyes, Vlastos in this earlier take on Socrates cannot help but conclude that he is dealing with a hopelessly outdated thinker who, on the one hand confesses ignorance in light of what *we* know is an impossible ideal in morality, and on the other hand maintains an admirable but “empirically” uninformed “faith” in free inquiry. In revealing language, Vlastos surmises that Socrates himself *must* have valued his “method of inquiry” over his “results.” For had he not done so, “he would have been just a preacher and teacher of moral truths, not also the professed agnostic, the tireless critic, examiner and re-examiner of himself



and others . . .” (VPS, 19). In other words, had he lacked the instincts of a twentieth-century analytic philosopher, Socrates would never have been able to accomplish anything we might still find worth reading about.

But this whole line of reasoning simply cannot be right. Socrates repeatedly denies he has or will ever have “moral truths” to teach; he does not “profess” agnosticism; and he is certainly more than a “tireless critic” (and again, this last phrase is also unsatisfactory because it lumps together Socrates’ critical stance toward his own understanding and toward that of others, when these are often very different). In his earlier phase, then, Vlastos saves the ignorant but virtuous Socrates from paradox by transporting “the Socratic method” across the centuries to our own time. The paradox of course remains. Moreover, there is not even anything especially Socratic about the method thus transported, for the Socrates in which Vlastos initially expresses such deep historical interest is turned into a twentieth-century epistemologist who happens also to be a man of [secular?] faith.

In fact, Vlastos himself came to see that there was something wrong here. In a touching and personal introduction to SIMP, he tells us how, in mid-career, he produced and then destroyed a finished manuscript on the Socratic dialogues—“a lemon,” he calls it—precisely because it failed to put Socrates’ “strangeness” in the center of the discussion (SIMP, 2). He then goes on to explain that over the next twenty years he gradually came to realize that for all his success in redirecting scholarly attention toward this crucial issue, he made one error “too big—a real whopper—and too noxious to be allowed a place in the limbo of forgettable mishaps” (VSI, 3). I did, correctly, keep my attention on “the central paradox,” he explains, and thus rightly emphasized the fact that Socrates both “*asserts* that he has no knowledge, none whatever, not a smidgen of it, ‘no wisdom, great or small’ (*Apology* 21b–d)” and also speaks, lives, and obviously “*implies* . . . in what he says” that he is “serenely confident that he has a goodly stock of it—sufficient for the quotidian pursuit of virtue.” My mistake, he says, was to explain Socrates’ assertions of ignorance in a way that failed to maintain “the balancing reservation” evidenced by how he conducted his life. It is useful to let Vlastos explain the mistake himself.

It was, he says, “exactly right and it goes to the heart of what is groundbreakingly new in Socrates” for me to have placed [1] his “renunciation of epistemic certainty at the core of his philosophizing,” but I was wrong to couple this claim with the idea that for Socrates this simply means [2] his elenctic practice “is quite compatible with suspension of judgment as to the material truth of any of its conclusions.” In fact, says Vlastos, between [1] and [2]

[t]here is no necessary connection. John Dewey was not giving up the search for knowledge when making the quest for certainty his *bête noire*. Neither was Socrates in his disclaimer of certainty—he least of all philosophers, maintaining as he did that knowledge is virtue.



My error had been to saddle Socrates with [2] on the strength of nothing better than [1].<sup>31</sup>

Vlastos goes on to explain his *later account* of Socrates in terms of this conclusion. Eventually, he says, he came to see, as more properly coupled with [1], a hitherto unappreciated strategy of “complex irony” that allows Socrates to do much more than operate with an awareness that he will never get certainty. I will return to this solution in a moment. First, however, I want to comment on Vlastos’ self-diagnosis.

Notice how much has not changed. In fundamental respects, the interpretive presentism remains. Socrates is still seen as playing his elenchus off against the ideals of deductive reasoning. All that has changed is that the latter is now judged by Deweyan rather than Parmenidean standards. Socrates’ confessions are thus still *epistemic* renunciations, even though Vlastos admits that Socrates has no interest in “what we call epistemology” (VSI, 237n.5). Moreover, Socratic irony is still conceived as *paradoxical*, largely because of the problem we now have in trying to analyze what he *asserts* and allegedly *claims to believe*. It would seem that in these respects at least, the Socrates of Vlastos’ later work is still as much the contemporary analytic colleague working on the question of moral knowledge as the Socrates of his earlier account.

According to Vlastos’ later interpretation, what really makes Socrates Socrates is the special nature of his irony in elenctic conversations. He comes to think that if we are to explain the Socratic paradox, we must see how this irony reflects the way Socrates makes “dual use of his words for knowing.” What he does is simultaneously deny that he is absolutely certain and precisely in this way leave himself “free to admit that he does have moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense.”<sup>32</sup> Vlastos tells us that he got the idea for this conception of “complex irony” from pondering the way we today might both *say*, and mean it, something like “Very heavy smoking is a cause of cancer”—and yet also not *feel* we have been refuted if we have to admit upon being challenged that we are not *sure* this is so (48–49). I ignore the sophisticated hedging built into the specimen statement itself; but it is important to see the basic weakness of this example. The unparadoxical duality in this kind of assertion depends on understanding the strengths and weaknesses of statistical “knowledge.” *In general* the studies show . . . , etc., but of course this cannot tell us the truth about each and every instance.

Yet could we not defend Vlastos’ analogy, at least in a somewhat weaker and less glaringly presentist form? Isn’t there evidence in the dialogues for a clear distinction between the flat denial of what Vlastos calls “knowledge<sub>C</sub>”—that is, absolutely certain knowledge (“what the gods know”)—and the tentative acceptance of what he calls “knowledge<sub>E</sub>,” that is, the sort of knowledge that Socrates can regard as “elenctically justifiable” (55–56)? Vlastos formulates this “hypothesis” about knowledge<sub>C</sub> and knowledge<sub>E</sub> as follows.



[I]n the domain of morals—the one to which all of [Socrates'] inquiries are confined—when he says he knows something he is referring to knowledge<sub>E</sub>; when he says he is not aware of knowing anything—absolutely anything, “great or small—he refers to knowledge<sub>C</sub>; when he says he has no knowledge of a particular topic he may mean *either* that in this case, as in all others, he has no knowledge<sub>C</sub> and does not look for any *or* that what he lacks on that topic is knowledge<sub>E</sub>, which with good luck, he might still reach by further searching. (58)

Yet even if one could find this distinction, at least in some of the dialogues, the issue is not whether the distinction is present, but (i) whether it can be made definitive of the situations in which Socrates disclaims/claims knowledge, and (ii) whether Socrates uses this distinction in the way that Vlastos says he does. On both these questions, I think, the answer is no.

In the first place, it is really not accurate to depict Socratic dialogue as if it were always a kind of epistemic debate. Certainly there are often arguments, and one can always elect to ignore who is arguing, on what occasion, and under what sort of initial stimulus and go straight to a formal reconstruction of the “logic” of the exchange. But as Vlastos is fully aware, Socrates himself does not do this. What is now often, I think misleadingly, called the dramatic situation of the dialogues matters a great deal to him. He demands sincerity from his interlocutors and wants to hear from them only those opinions they themselves take seriously. He treats different interlocutors differently, on different sorts of occasions, in accordance with the sort of persons they are and the kinds of claims they make or questions they raise. Vlastos' hypothesis simply cannot cover—comfortably and equally—for example, the exchanges with Cephalus, Polymarchus, and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, or with Euthyphro, Crito, or Laches. Indeed sometimes, as in the *Euthyphro*, rather than first disclaiming the possibility of knowledge<sub>C</sub> of piety and moving on to a discussion of knowledge<sub>E</sub>, Socrates begins by asking Euthyphro to tell him what knowledge<sub>C</sub> of piety is (5c–d)—that is, he repeatedly demands that Euthyphro tell him the “nature” of piety, so that as in mathematics, he will always have a standard against which to judge all disputed instances of a thing. In general, Vlastos' distinction between knowledge<sub>C</sub> and knowledge<sub>E</sub> is too abstract to capture the differing ways in which disclaimers and assertions and what Socrates does with both of them vary from dialogue to dialogue and person to person.

Consider, moreover, Vlastos' interpretation of those occasions (which Vlastos admits are relatively rare) where Socrates actually appears to claim possession of “knowledge” in some sense. Is it true that *for Socrates*, this means that “the content of that knowledge must be *propositions* he thinks are elenctically justifiable” (56), and that he understands justifiability (or “viability”) as a function of pitting a claim “against its *contradictory* in elenctic argument” to see if it will prevail?<sup>33</sup> For every passage that might be interpreted this way, there are numerous others that clearly cannot. For



example, in the *Euthyphro* (12d), when Socrates finally proposes the idea that piety is part of justice, its “contradictory” is never considered, and it is not correct to say that Socrates “holds” this proposal to be true, pending an “elenctic argument” with Euthyphro. Here as elsewhere, again by Vlastos’ own reports, Socrates’ proposals are mostly not his own, but what is “generally held” among Athenians. In the *Euthyphro*, one might even suggest that Socrates’ proposed formulation, “piety is part of justice,” simply amounts to a restatement of something implicit in Euthyphro’s ignorant claims. For in spite of his not knowing what he is talking about, Euthyphro seems “somehow” constrained to consistently relate his concern with being *pious* to various claims about what “one” wants to say about what is *just*.

Finally, however, there is another problem with Vlastos’ “knowledge<sub>C</sub> vs. knowledge<sub>E</sub>” hypothesis. Not only is there an obvious lack of fit between this very contemporary-sounding hypothesis and the Socratic texts; Vlastos employs it in conjunction with his idea of the “standard elenchus” that he thinks Socrates enacts in all his conversations, “throughout its motley variations.”<sup>34</sup> The formal model for this elenchus comes complete with a list of steps by which Socrates entertains theses, investigates premises, and establishes conclusions, and the list is followed by a detailed analysis of the *Gorgias* that allegedly establishes how this is The Method by which Socrates “searches indefatigably for moral truth . . . [even] in the most unlikely of all places—in the minds of the misguided, confused, wrong-headed people whose souls he seeks to improve” (28–29).

Others have lodged the internal criticism that Vlastos’ formal model relies too heavily on the analysis of Socrates’ behavior in a single dialogue.<sup>35</sup> But in my view, it is his whole approach to Socratic dialogue—not just his hypothesis about knowledge types or the formalist narrowness of his *Gorgias*-centered model of dialogue—that makes both his original and his later, more elaborate account ring hollow. To put it unkindly, Vlastos’ analysis of Socratic dialogues makes them sound as if they take place in the dry air of a contemporary epistemology seminar, as reported to us by someone who is both an analytic epistemologist himself and one who has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian religious heritage. I do not mean that Vlastos consciously embraces such presentism; indeed, he is often very unflattering about other commentators who approach Socrates with contemporary banners boldly flying. Moreover, he repeatedly insists that the elenchus “examines not just propositions but lives.”<sup>36</sup> Yet my philosophical interests, he admits, are “impure. I cannot pass the buck to the historians without passing it on myself.” My Socrates is “the Socrates of history—the Socrates who made history,” and it certainly is not the Socrates of, say, Santas’ book in the Routledge “Arguments of the Philosophers” series.<sup>37</sup> Yet all of this hermetic candor only sharpens the issue. Why, in spite of his stated intentions, does Vlastos still sound so much like ahistorically inclined commentators like Santas?



I address this question especially to the work of Vlastos, because his position, whether in its earlier or later version, is far from idiosyncratic. Not only has it been the catalyst for a vast literature, but (and perhaps partly because) it is grounded in the still widely shared sorts of assumptions about how contemporary philosophers should treat history that I discussed in Chapter 1. Here, in brief summary, is how I think these assumptions continue to obscure Socratic dialogue even from commentators of good will like Vlastos.

When it comes to “the nature of knowledge,” postpositivists and post-classical analytic philosophers are eager to think more generously than their predecessors. Typically, they are pluralistic about possible “kinds” of knowledge. The early Vlastos still tends to evaluate Socratic knowledge/ignorance classically, under empiricist-positivist prejudices: Socrates does not have knowledge in the only full-bodied sense there is; therefore he must (and is really unable to do more than) say so. The later Vlastos wants to be more generous: There is “tentative” or “fallible” knowledge, too, he says; and perhaps one is even allowed to say that not all fallible knowledge is fallible in the same way—so that some of it is, for example, natural knowledge of “facts” to be gained by empirical research, and some of it is moral knowledge gained by elenctic inquiry.

Yet even as he grants that knowledge might actually come in types, including fallible ones, Vlastos continues to insist that whatever type of knowledge Socrates is trying to find, what everyone knows about philosophical inquiry continues to apply. It must be (i) some sort of *knowledge*, (ii) pursued by some sort of specifiable *method*, (iii) for the purpose of making some sort of *claims*, and it is (iv) the warrantability of these claims that we readers must attend to. As for the “examined life” that Socrates lived, what else could this mean than that he sought “moral truth.” Of course, we moderns know that it is only dogmatists and true believers that still cling to the pre-modern model of an objective morality, so we can certainly understand why Socrates would want to denounce the idea that humans will ever possess divine knowledge and why he would settle for an irony-drenched “quest” for something lesser.

## VLASTOS REVISED, BUT NOT REJECTED

Much of the criticism of Vlastos’ position accepts the basic line of reasoning summarized in the previous section, but argues for corrections in one of two main directions. One group of critics focuses on Vlastos’ interpretation of Socrates’ method, the other, on his relative neglect of Socrates’ “existential” concerns. Regarding the *Socratic method*, even Vlastos’ later construal of it in terms of complex irony is now widely regarded as insufficient. In the end, Brickhouse and Smith, who have traced the post-Vlastos controversy over the decades in great detail, speak for many others. Strictly construed, they



say, there is no Socratic Method. Plato doesn't even give "it" a name, and in the end it will be better if we simply put to rest the idea that there even is a "problem of the elenchus." For according to Socrates, they explain, moral philosophy

is not merely a matter of demonstrating which propositions in the moral sphere are true and which false. Rather, it is a rich and complex enterprise in which one must purge others of their pretense of wisdom, undertake to determine what kinds of things all human beings must believe about how to live if their lives are to be happy, test and refine definitions of the virtues, deliberate about right action, and when the nature of right and wrong action is clear enough, exhort others to pursue what is right and shun what is wrong.<sup>38</sup>

I suggest reading this passage three times, with three different issues in mind. First, even if we grant that Socrates is "not merely" interested in testing propositions, we are still asked to begin with Vlastos' view of Socrates, the analytic epistemologist . . . and add something. Second, if Socrates' dialogical practice is as "rich and complex" as Brickhouse and Smith make it, what does this practice not include? And third, except under the stringent requirements of a graduate epistemology seminar, to what moral philosopher would the above description not apply?

Small wonder, then, that in a later essay the same authors report having ultimately concluded that "the very idea of 'the Socratic *elenchos*' . . . is an artifact of modern scholarship" which "has distracted [us] from the Socratic mission, which is what made Socrates what he was."<sup>39</sup> Yet even this Socrates, who has a mission but no Method, remains a close relative of the one described by Vlastos. For it turns out that his "mission," reduced to its essentials, is for him to be "a man absolutely . . . devoted to the life of *reasoned argument*." Brickhouse and Smith employ the italicized phrase without further qualification.

Regarding the "*existential dimension*" of the dialogues, other critics typically complain that even if Vlastos mentions it and tries to account for it in terms of what is now called the "say what you mean" principle,<sup>40</sup> he fails to emphasize sufficiently that it is only in terms of this feature of Socrates' activity that one can fully explain "what he stood for." The point of his inquiries, so goes the argument, is that they are supposed to make us better, not just a better reasoners—which is why he insists that his interlocutors offer their own opinions, the ones that make their outlook what it is, the ones they themselves take to heart, not just hypotheses or restatements of "what people say."

This criticism runs the gamut from Brickhouse and Smith's milder and basically additive view (i.e., that Socrates did "more" than argue and had a moral-pedagogical, not just epistemic purpose in doing so), to Forster's quite straightforwardly (if still epistemically) "religious" view, to Nehamas'



more sweeping objection that “what Socrates is” cannot be found in any of the arguments he makes, or definitions he defends, or method he uses, because it really lies in the “silent” example of his practice of “the art of living.” With a nod toward Kierkegaard, Nehamas condemns all the “noisy” interpreting of Socrates’ activities—that is, over-the-top analyses of what he did and what he said that keep us from hearing the “fundamental stillness” that surrounds the life of Socrates. Echoing Brickhouse and Smith, Nehamas complains that these analyses have enticed us into becoming preoccupied with the particulars of his arguments or looking for his alleged “theory” of the essence of the examined life when in fact he gives us none and denies there is one (*Art of Living*, 70–71, 96–98).

Observe, however, that all of these criticisms—even when, like Nehamas’, they are avowedly existential rather than epistemic—tend to carry over into their descriptions of the examined life some variant of Vlastos’ idea that the pursuit of this life lies precisely in the employment of something like a Socratic “approach.” A modern Cartesian rather than ancient Greek assumption haunts their efforts: For us moderns, morality is mostly a matter of seeking clear thoughts and exercising a strong will. First, one reasons toward an “affirmation” of the proper thoughts, and then, one learns how to effectively “apply” them in practice. Socrates’ moral person, says Vlastos, is one who “claims to the fullest extent his freedom to make his own choice between right and wrong, not only in action, but in judgment.” Vlastos anticipates the objection that he is using un-Socratic language here, but only long enough to dismiss it. For he insists that it *just is* this “vision of human freedom, of which the Socratic method is an expression,” and if in the end we must deny to this vision the name of “knowledge” and instead conclude “that the best name for it is faith,” so be it.<sup>41</sup>

Surely we should ask, however, whether something has not gone seriously wrong when Socratic elenchus is defended primarily for anticipating something like Descartes’ doctrine of judgment in Meditation IV and Kant’s idea of autonomy in the *Groundwork*. Contrary to what one might expect, even Nehamas’ seemingly un-Vlastosian position depends essentially on this sort of modern makeover of Socratic philosophizing. After several chapters in which he explains, on the one hand, how he stands on some of the key debates about the Socratic method, and on the other hand, why the real Socrates cannot be understood from these debates, Nehamas concludes that we must reject even the idea that Socrates made “a single mode of life, the life of reason, the best life for all.”<sup>42</sup> Socrates, he asserts, is best understood as a model and inspiration for *any* aspiring “artist of living.” In other words, he is important not so much for a “specific mode of self-fashioning” that he develops, but for seeing life precisely as an engagement in self-fashioning. This, he argues, is what Montaigne, Nietzsche, Foucault, and even Plato all took him to be—which explains both their fascination for Socrates the man and their own deviations from what he allegedly taught.



[T]he mode of life . . . Plato presented through Socrates in his early works was not obviously one that everyone was obliged, on rational grounds, to follow. . . . Socrates' invitation to his interlocutors is pro-treptic and nondogmatic. His attitude is moderate: he wants people to follow his new way of life but has no arguments to convince them they must do so. Plato's position is more ambitious and more extreme: he believes that a particular philosophical way of life is best for everyone and is convinced he can prove it. (97)

In fact, concludes Nehamas, one should learn from Socrates' example that there are *many* kinds of life worth living, and it is simply impossible to reduce them all, deductively or empirically, to one. It is a basic assumption of the tradition Plato founded that the right idea of philosophy makes it a theoretical and systematic activity, always focused on a concern with "rational grounds" and "proofs" for one's convictions. Socrates' "private act of self-creation" may seem as if it must be construed as implicitly expressing a "universalist praise of the life of reason as best for all" (14). But when all the clutter created by this Platonist assumption is set aside, one sees that Socrates is merely someone who "was concerned with the care of his own self, and he urged his fellow citizens to undertake a similar private project for themselves."

Peel away Nehamas' Nietzschean rhetoric, and the conceptual background for this portrait of Socrates, his undogmatic "silence," and the hints at "self-fashioning" is familiar and unmistakable. It is Vlastos' image of the "free man," with all the specific content removed—more Rorty's liberal ironist than Plato's lover of wisdom. Here, Nehamas (no doubt unintentionally) shows us the modern options forced upon us by Anglophone commentary. Either seek the universal, or settle for the particular—or maybe in some other unstable sense, settle for the always-*less-than*-universal, with whatever "irony" this requires. In any case, these options do indeed leave Socrates' statements, if not his very life, "paradoxical."<sup>43</sup>

Recent commentary swings widely between these Platonic-universalist and Nietzschean-particularist options, and all of it leaves the strong impression that Socrates is mostly important as catalyst for philosophical revolutions in which he himself is no participant. His "ur-Platonic" questions breed ethical and metaphysical systems. His confessions of ignorance give us the courage to be free and objective. His remarkable displays of intellectual honesty foreshadow our love of free and secular rationality; and his pioneering search for definitions anticipates our logic. Yet in the end, he suffers from not having the privilege of being one of us. Socrates never asked our meta-question. He never asked what knowledge is; and as a result he mistook his methodologically expressed faith in human freedom for a tentative or partial possession of Moral Truth. As Vlastos puts it, "That the man who had this faith to a supreme degree should have mistaken it for knowledge, is yet another part of the [therefore admittedly unresolved]



paradox of Socrates” (VPS, 21). Even if my first take on Socrates was epistemologically ungenerous, he asserts, all my subsequent loosening-up, complexifications, and common sense translations of what Socrates appears to believe he can accomplish thus necessarily leave him paradoxical, and probably best appreciated for what others made of him in order to actually do . . . *philosophy*. In this interpretive atmosphere, it is small wonder that intense scholarship has sometimes been followed by capitulation. It is possible, writes one seasoned veteran, that there was a time when Plato still thought of Socrates as a “genuine philosopher in contrast to the Sophists.” But as he moved toward “his own view of philosophy as a systematic investigation of the fundamental structure of reality,” it was only a matter of time before he had to reinterpret

Socrates’ success in guiding self-critical thought to the elimination of false beliefs . . . [by ascribing it] . . . not to philosophy as he had previously believed but to a special sort of ‘divine dispensation.’ Socrates is then a magician, an individual with an unaccountable power of divining the truth and leading others to it, and . . . no longer, by Platonic standards, a philosopher, but a very special, and very noble, sophist.<sup>44</sup>

In the end, Nehamas’ portrait Socrates the “self-fashioner” seems ultimately just as implausible and anachronistic as Vlastos’. Yet I think that what Nehamas says about the condition we are in when we try to “be” self-fashioners does, albeit unintentionally, identify something important. Any attempt to be an artist of life, he says, “always begins in the middle. It is only after one has [already] become someone or other . . . [that] one can begin to try to become not just someone or other but oneself” (187). In Nehamas, this as a throwaway line. It comes too late, with virtually no elaboration, and there is no evidence that he hears Nietzsche’s reflections on our historicity here. Yet we might let his remark take us in a direction Nehamas did not go. For when one really considers Socrates in the midst of things, one finds a remarkable “silence” of a very different and un-Nehamasian sort—namely, a total absence of any suggestion that his dialogical practice is what Anglophone commentary insists it must be. Nowhere in the early dialogues does Socrates ever explicitly claim that virtue is knowledge. Nowhere does he use the word “method” (*μέθοδος*) or display any interest in what we, since Descartes, would call epistemology (let alone meta-epistemology). And nowhere in these dialogues does he consider the idea of moral or political “autonomy” (*αὐτονομία*).<sup>45</sup> It is in the midst of *this* silence that I propose to situate an alternative discussion.

## SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHIZING

To state my alternative quickly, I do not think Socrates’ confessions of ignorance spring either from the experience of a failure to possess “knowledge”



(metaphysical, practical, or otherwise) or from any convictions concerning the importance of “free inquiry.” Rather, they signal his recognition that beneath the surface of our beliefs and theories, there runs what he calls “life” and I call a *vital understanding* that grounds and guides all our specific inquiries and activities and that is in turn influenced by them.<sup>46</sup> It is precisely this vital understanding that defies so many post-Socratic classifications. It is not and is not structured like a fundamental belief or theory, or a set of beliefs or theories. Rather it is his general orientation toward and global *sense* of things—a sense of things that gives Socrates’ statements and actions their family resemblance as belonging to a single outlook, but one that can never itself be directly subjected to total intellectual scrutiny or chosen in a moment of utterly self-possessed freedom.

This “vital understanding” is, I believe, the “life” whose course and underlying condition Socrates is thinking of when he says he cares only for an “examined life.” Judging from the early dialogues, this life appears to have three fundamental features.<sup>47</sup> First, it is at any particular moment the total, concretely (but always to some extent implicitly) *given* sense of things that constitutes Socrates’ outlook, and it is in terms of this sense of things that specific beliefs, theories, and actions are questioned/analyzed. Second, it is really this vital understanding itself and just specific claims, beliefs, and theories that he is *continually* (albeit indirectly) *submitting to scrutiny and re-examination*. And third, his inquiries may thus be capable of indirectly improving his general sense of things, but only in a dialogic process that remains essentially *incompletable*. By attending to these three features of vital understanding, we can see how Socratic philosophizing proceeds through repeated episodes of inquiry without his ever experiencing either abject metaphysical emptiness or joyful intellectual freedom.

First, then, by saying Socrates’ vital understanding constitutes a concretely *given* outlook, I mean that at the beginning of every conversation, whatever its topic, this topic is already a living issue for Socrates. Commentators sometimes say more about this phenomenon than they know. Vlastos notes, for example, that Socrates’ method

will not work if the opinion you give him is just an opinion; it must be your opinion: the one you stand ready to live by, so that if that opinion should be refuted, your own life or a part of it will be indicted. . . . These are the qualities Socrates himself brings to the argument, and . . . they protect it against the possibility that its dialectic, however rigorous, would merely grind out . . . wild conclusions from irresponsible premises.<sup>48</sup>

The obvious part of what Vlastos says here is that Socratic questioning is never academic. There is an urgency and intimacy about it that cannot be accounted for in terms of curiosity, wonder, or skepticism; rather, it derives from the fact that some topic has become an issue, “here,” for the actually



existing Socrates—and, he assumes (at least initially), is also such an issue for whomever he is talking to as well.

There is, however, another part of this observation that Vlastos apparently does not see and that is indeed typically missed. Unlike Vlastos, when I say that Socrates puts himself on the line in his dialogues, I am not just trying to “balance” my account of his *method* with a recognition of what motivates his *use* of it. We need a better conception of how something becomes an issue for Socrates. Characteristically, he is quickened into inquiry because he encounters an opinion about the topic that seems, to some degree, not covered by what he already thinks he understands about the topic. The stimulation to initiate a dialogue *is already happening* before Socrates formulates any specific questions. In this way, the function of vital understanding in his dialogues is more basic than any particular strategy Socrates might use to respond to it. Piety, or justice, or temperance, or whatever becomes of interest precisely in the moment when and because it is encountered *through the present understanding of such things that he is already actually living by*—an understanding that now, somehow, does not seem quite to cover the matter. The usual description of Socrates coming to each dialogue with a deliberate focus on what he “knows” or doesn’t know is thus quite misleading. In fact, what he cares most about at any given moment is “how he is already [understandingly] disposed toward” the topic.

To be so disposed is precisely not to be squared off against the presently encountered topic with an entirely conscious, method-guided Mind that is comprehensively aware of how one is supposed to “reason” about the topic. A telling distinction lurks behind Vlastos’ remark that when “your” opinion is refuted, a “part of your own life” is thereby “indicted.” Taken by itself, by an abstract Mind engaged in Philosophical Inquiry, an opinion can be attacked, refuted, replaced—in short, explicitly and exhaustively handled—without any personal cost. But if it is “your” opinion and not merely a possible or hypothetical one, its refutation hurts. *Your* opinion is like the visible part of an iceberg—expressive of the general, lived outlook by which you get your bearings toward, among other things, what the refuted opinion is about. In the moment your opinion is refuted, that outlook gets fundamentally challenged—“indicted,” as Vlastos says. The problem is, you cannot just trade in an “indicted part of your life,” as if “your life” were like a present object whose parts are your opinions, so that you can get rid of the indictment by sloughing off an unwanted part.

Indeed at this point, the metaphor that depicts opinions as visible parts of a mostly submerged iceberg of vital understanding is in danger of breaking down. Icebergs are, at least from some angle, accessible objects. But vital understanding is never like an accessible object. All we can do with it is try indirectly to make it better, by playing off what it currently prompts us to say (“I have long thought that . . .”) against whatever statements now in some way seem to confront it unsatisfactorily (“but now you assert instead . . .”). Of course, this is exactly the process Socrates calls confessing



his ignorance. With each such confession, he prepares himself—on this occasion, with this interlocutor, in the face of this challenge, and as regards this particular topic—to test how well or badly he is already “given to understand” it.

We come, then, to the second feature of Socrates’ vital understanding, namely, that it is this understanding itself and not just his explicit ideas, beliefs, or theories that gets *continually tested* in his dialogues. Here is the source of much confusion. In Plato’s early works, Socrates sometimes appears to hold first one opinion, then another. Sometimes he seems to settle for just getting two opinions into conflict with one another. Sometimes opinions with obvious weaknesses appear to be left standing at the end of the conversation. Socrates may therefore sometimes appear to say one thing and really “mean” another. Or he seems to harbor an opinion that is “sprung” on an unsuspecting interlocutor at an embarrassing moment. Or . . . Aren’t many of these occasions “paradoxical”? If we want to maintain that Socrates is more than a sophisticated magician, Plato’s inspiration, or a good example, don’t we need to something like Vlastos’ theory of “complex irony” to account for all this? Only if we assume, wrongly, that our job is primarily to evaluate the explicit claims Socrates and his companions make, because testing these claims is the main point of dialogue.

What I am trying to suggest, however, is that this is not the main point. Challenging an opinion may indeed be a common opening move for him, but what is really being “examined” is, as he consistently says, his “life” insofar as it is put into question by the opinion. Moreover, the challenge is first of all personal. I am not merely trying to refute you, he tells Critias; I am “examining the argument for *my own sake primarily*, but *perhaps also* for the sake of my friends” (*Charmides*, 166d, my emphasis). This remark, which Vlastos thinks Socrates can really mean only if he is judging the conversation according to “Parmenidean” or “Deweyan” standards, is actually less strange and puzzling than this makes him seem.<sup>49</sup> If Socratic dialogue is always undertaken in response to some experienced challenge and for the sake of improving one’s own vital understanding (i.e., “for my sake”), then the challenging phenomenon (e.g., Critias’ opinion) may have center stage—but without being the “primary” concern. Whether the resulting dialogue will “perhaps” also benefit the persons he talks to depends upon their own willingness to engage “themselves” in the discussion. But it will always improve Socrates’ own vital understanding, for the challenge prompts him to “examine *his* life” in any case.

Consider the *Apology*’s discussion of the Delphic oracle in this connection. As we know, when Chaerephon asked the Pythia, “Is anyone wiser than Socrates?” she said “No.” Socrates tells us that when he heard about this, he was shocked. What can this mean, he thought, that Apollo thinks I am “the wisest”? Later on, he explains, he came to see what Apollo really meant: No one is wiser than those, like Socrates, who realize the worthlessness of human wisdom.<sup>50</sup> This is not a good place to get hermeneutically



sloppy. We need to see the precise way in which Socrates takes the oracle's pronouncement to heart, and to do this, we must be careful to think about not just what he says, but when he could say it. In his presentation to the jury, Socrates recounts both what Chaerephon actually reported to him (i.e., nobody is wiser) and what he "heard" (i.e., I am the wisest). We will miss his point if we assume, contrary to the text, that Socrates' initial reaction *already implies* his ultimate conclusion—namely, that "nobody is wiser" really means "I am as wise as any human being can be." The whole thrust of his account is to explain what he *discovered*—that is, how he came to improve his understanding of what loving wisdom means, in the process of interpreting the oracle through his dialogues. Thus, he reports having only been able *in retrospect* to see that Apollo was simply treating him as an example.

At the outset Socrates has, let us call it, a pre-Delphic understanding of what he is doing in his inquiries. Indeed, Socrates prides himself on being able to admit how much he doesn't know. Hence, Apollo's message seems shockingly wrong, for it speaks of his wisdom instead of his lack of it. On this surprising occasion, Socrates finds that the proposition that would express his present understanding (viz., "I am ignorant") is challenged by the god's actual declaration, "No one is wiser." Of course, he cannot just divest himself of a proposition he would otherwise have accepted and embrace Apollo's message instead—for the simple reason that he does not *understand* the message, and he will not accept propositions that do not reflect his understanding. So here, as on countless other occasions, he confesses his ignorance. This does not mean just saying, "I do not know." His confessions are always something richer than this. They are designed to reflect the tension he experiences between the understanding of the matter he has developed up to the present moment and what now challenges it. Here, it involves his bringing his pre-Delphic understanding to bear on something that now *appears* to contradict it.<sup>51</sup> At first, he manages only to combine the propositions "I lack wisdom" and "No one is wiser," not into another contradictory proposition, but into an *appropriate* (if ultimately somewhat misdirected) *question*, "How can I be the wisest?" His question brings into focus precisely what initially *appears* to be the problem—namely, Apollo's (seemingly mislabeled) contrast between Socrates the confessor of ignorance and all those other self-proclaimed wiser Athenians around him. It is this question that enables him to confront all those allegedly wiser people in such a way that he is eventually able to learn Apollo's real meaning.<sup>52</sup>

In a certain sense, then, it is true that after dialogues with all those Athenians who it turns out only appear to be wiser, Socrates finds he has resolved his question and can accept another different proposition—namely, "I am an example of the wisest." Note, however, that Socrates "defends" that proposition not by argument, not *as* a proposition, but by explaining to the jury that it articulates better what he has come to understand about how he lives. No doubt a parade of opinions and theories has come and gone in



all the intervening conversations; but beneath it, there has been running a continuous, seamless process of understanding that has been transformed from its earlier (relatively unclear and easily shocked) sense of merely lacking wisdom (and taking a kind of uninformed pride in this), into a later (relatively clear and presently more satisfying) sense of what it is to love it. What “satisfies” Socrates here is not, in the usual meaning, “the answer” to “a question”—that is, the acquiring of some item of knowledge (either *τέχνη* or *επιστήμη*). What is satisfying is his “bettered” understanding itself—one that is now improved sufficiently over its earlier condition to take into account even and especially the oracle’s challenge to it.<sup>53</sup> By the time of his trial, this is a sufficient resolution of the issue of wisdom for Socrates to be able to tell the jury why he is better off than the seemingly wiser people around him, and why he has become valuable to other Athenians in the process of finding this out.

Here, we come to the third feature of vital understanding, namely, its *necessarily incompletable* character. Why, as the *Apology* puts it, will there never *be* anyone wiser than a Socratic inquirer? Socrates’ insistence that his special wisdom is merely human has been explained in a number of ways. To some, it seems grounded in a humbling comparison with divine being(s), or in deep-seated, “Parmenidean” intuitions concerning human minds and eternal truth. To others, it is a pagan’s feeble gesture in the direction of what is really accessible only through revelation. Still others see a pragmatic refusal to abstract and generalize beyond the matter at hand. And some even attribute to Socrates an existentialist conviction about human finitude. All these accounts suffer, I think, from the kind of overly determined reading-backwards that evaluates Socrates’ inquiries in terms of positions held today. The real point can be made quite simply. No explanatory principle or theory need be applied to the phenomenon of Socratic understanding from the outside to account for its incompleteness.<sup>54</sup> It is already so for reasons intrinsic to the “examined life” itself.

To reiterate quickly, in the face of what the Oracle said about him, Socrates could initially do no more than confess his failure to understand it. He confronts the apparent cause of this failure with a question: “How can I be the wisest, when I know nothing and others appear to know so much?” Decades later, after countless conversations with politicians, poets, and craftsmen, his understanding of the matter has improved to the point where he can tell the jury, “I am indeed better off than those I talked to, and so I see what Apollo meant. . . .” Yet wonderfully transformed though this understanding may be, even the sixty-nine-year-old Socrates does not regard it as sacrosanct. In his eyes, “I am an example of the wisest” is not a “proposition” forever after simply “true.” He does not, as Gadamer likes to put it, “come to a stand” with this statement. It is not the unchanging “measure” of what it is to love wisdom.

Granted, as Socrates unpacks his statement, we see that it certainly articulates a lot—but not everything. There is nothing yet, for example, about



the degree to which a love of wisdom might be possible or beneficial outside Athens, or about whether Socratic inquiry could be practiced by, say, a well-traveled “citizen of the world.” The court’s sentence of death makes the whole issue arise for Socrates in a new way—again not in a manner that demands a final answer about things like wisdom, justice, and loyalty *überhaupt*, but strictly in terms of Crito’s argument that he should flee Athens in order to avoid injustice. I can now complete my alternative portrait of Socrates, the completely unparadoxical lover of wisdom, by considering the fact that he responds to Crito’s argument in terms of, as he puts it, his “being an Athenian.”

## SOCRATES THE ATHENIAN

Of course, before he can have a dialogue with Crito, he must first calm him down enough so that he can enter into the sort of conversation the two old friends have had before—that is, the sort of conversation in which “how things will look” and “what people will say” are not the tests of right action. “My dear Crito,” he says, “your eager spirit (*προθυμία*) is worth much if it is rightly directed. But if not, the greater it is, the worse. [For] we must *carefully consider* whether this thing is to be done . . .” (*Crito*, 46b, my emphasis).

Crito is usually portrayed as, to put it kindly, unphilosophical. One author has recently tried to turn the tables on this assumption, as part of a general strategy to take more seriously the actual arguments put forth by some of Socrates’ interlocutors.<sup>55</sup> He praises Crito’s “good heart” (74), shows that Socrates frequently ignores or fails to successfully “contradict Crito’s claims,” and concludes that even if dialogues like the *Crito* portray Socrates’

friends [as] all too human, Socrates hardly seems human at all. He seems more like a disembodied intellect, a rational soul temporarily housed in a body and awaiting release. . . . His serenity in the face of death is . . . a remote and chilly serenity.” (73)

Beverluis, who dedicates his book to Vlastos, thus continues the mainstream focus on the claims, theories, and positions the characters in the dialogues represent, albeit sometimes “emotionally”—with little consideration for how much the loving of wisdom depends on the way Socrates and/or his interlocutors are *taking* what they say. A “carefully considered” inquiry is, for Socrates, a thoroughly contextualized exploration of what something really means to him, how it already vitally understood *at the present moment*. One cannot be reflectively “in touch” with this sense of things if one is, say, in a state of panic about having to move quickly to save one’s skin. Panic does indeed tend to make one intellectually blind, and we



may sympathize with someone who “all too humanly” has it, but certainly does not follow that we must interpret this problem in terms of the forced Cartesian option of either “emotionally” entertaining an idea or “coldly” analyzing it, as if one’s embodiment were a temporary and ultimately irrelevant impediment to “seeing the Truth.”

In defending the importance of Socrates’ interlocutors and their views, Beversluis intends to be deeply critical of recent scholarship.<sup>56</sup> Here, however, it is more important to see how his study is precisely of a piece with it. To reverse the usual focus on Socrates’ “views” for the sake of reconsidering the value of the views of his interlocutors is to continue to assume that interpreting the dialogues, like interpreting any philosophical work, means analyzing positions, the arguments given for them, and ultimately the warrant for holding them. In these respects, Beversluis leaves everything in place. Philosophy is above all epistemology, conducted in an atmosphere of the modern dualism of cognition (with its methods and positions) versus emotion (with its feelings of, e.g., loyalty, fear, and panic). Indeed, he even tries to generate “sympathy” for Socrates’ companions by making unusually sharp-edged use of this dualism. After Vlastos, the “say what you mean” principle has become increasingly popular because it *seems* to give the dialogues an “existential dimension,” humanize the arguments, and even help explain how the elenchus might actually lead people to change their minds. Beversluis, however, claims that Socrates mostly violates this principle—employing “unscrupulous dialectical tactics” to turn every conversation in the direction he wants it to go.<sup>57</sup> Of course, if his interlocutors have to deal with such an unscrupulous companion, one cannot help but sympathize with them. It is no surprise, then, that Beversluis concludes his discussion of the *Crito* by wondering out loud whether Socrates, absent Crito’s visit, might not have been “perfectly content to spend his final hours in solitude, pondering the mixed sensations of pleasure and pain in his legs and setting the verses of Aesop to music” (73).

No talk of sympathy for Socrates’ companions can hide the metaphysical Platonism and epistemological Cartesianism of this approach. When Socrates tries to calm Crito down, it is not so that Real, Cold, Philosophy can take place. As Socrates goes on to state flatly, “I am eager to explore with you, Crito, whether my present circumstances change in any way *what we have said previously*.”<sup>58</sup> The very last thing someone who has spent all his time improving his “life” would want is to do with his final hours is sleep or otherwise make his physical body as comfortable as possible. That Crito fails at first to see this point does not mean he is passionate and Socrates is devoid of feeling. Quite literally at the end of his life, Socrates is still anxious to test his vital understanding against one more challenge—this time, on the occasion of Crito’s barrage of bad “arguments”—specifically in order to see whether he could still be a lover of wisdom and Apollo’s special gadfly if he fled the city in order to avoid an obviously unjust sentence. There is nothing surprising in finding, in the person of Crito, someone who



is being both a nice guy and good friend . . . and who also initially does not understand what is at stake. But there should not be anything surprising either about what Socrates wants. The understanding of justice Socrates has built up over decades of dialogue now confronts “circumstances” he has never faced. Granted that injustice has been done *to* him, what does justice demand *of* him? Can he still be a lover of wisdom and Apollo’s special gadfly if he flees the city? He concludes, of course, that because he “is” an Athenian, he can not.

It is the historical concreteness of his exchange with Crito that I want to stress here. Socrates’ whole idea of having “made an agreement” with the city has prompted many readers to take a Platonistic step back from the text and ponder Socrates’ supposedly essentialist distinction between the wicked jurors and just Athenian Law. For me, however, the metaphors by which he likens the laws to his parents, his teachers, his protector as a citizen, but not his executioner—all of them should be read with a Nietzschean eye. They articulate Socrates’ sense of his having-been, of his historicity, and so most importantly—reconsidered now in confrontation with current circumstances—they jointly constitute the expression of his understanding of what kind of options are available to him if he is to “remain just.”

In short, “I am an Athenian” expresses Socrates’ sense of how he must face any experienced lack of fit between what he thinks he already understands and the initially unclear demands of a current situation. Frequently, these demands come in the form of an interlocutor’s claim to knowledge; here, it comes in the form of Crito’s plea that he not allow himself to be treated unjustly. In each case, we can see how the three features of what I have been calling his “vital understanding” actually operate in Socrates’ inquiries. *First*, a confession of ignorance acknowledges how this understanding, in its present condition, is being unsettled by a current challenge. *Next*, an actual inquiry begins that closely follows the contours of the unsettling occasion. Interlocutors are handled as much in terms of the sorts of persons they are and how they make their claims as in terms of what they claim to know. *Finally*, the aporetic end of each cycle of inquiry is no mark of failure. Through the dialogical consideration of the events and persons that shape an inquiry’s course, what was initially questionable comes to be understood just precisely as well as is possible for and appropriate to the present occasion.

## SOCRATES “BEING” SOCRATES

To conclude this chapter, I begin with the obvious. The Socrates of Plato’s early dialogues is no Platonist. He loves wisdom; he does not have it. “Philosophy,” our tradition tells us, is what Plato seeks, what later figures often believe they can find, and what contemporary thinkers want to see properly tested (unless, of course, they regard themselves as postmodern). For



Socrates, on the contrary, there is always philosophizing, but there is not and never needs to be Philosophy. To see why this is so for him—that is, to see how his dialogues actually work to improve his vital understanding, not just his alleged “claims”—is to see as well that Socrates’ *life* is no paradox. To “examine life” is simply to be forever improving one’s understanding, and all the machinery of Philosophy that we have learned about in the meantime takes on a very different cast when it is seen in light of this Socratic task.

Much more is thus at stake here than the scholarly problem of properly interpreting Socrates in a post-Socratic world. Since the beginning of the modern period, and not just for Anglo-Americans, Western philosophers have increasingly tended to focus on human language, its structure, its uses, and the tests for its assertions. But from the Socrates I am defending, we would hear a strong objection. As noted earlier, in numerous dialogues he (Socrates) treats interlocutors roughly when they do not tell him what *they* think, but instead mouth platitudes or quote poets. He does this because he understands that *how one means things* is at least as urgent a problem for the lover of wisdom as *what one says*. Maybe a god or Plato’s philosopher king could make use of essential definitions, but human beings can only act out of what they really mean and how they really mean it. At least “What I really mean” reflects my vital understanding, even if it is not divine wisdom. But if I focus instead on “What one says about X,” I consider instead merely statements that need have no connection with my *own* understanding at all, except insofar as I let my understanding degenerate into the condition of merely being a repository for whatever is familiar or popular.

As Socrates was painfully aware, persons in prestigious positions often “talk cheaply,” but no one requires a special incentive to do this. The habit of just saying things, without realizing how revealing this inevitably is about who and what we understand ourselves to *be*, is common everywhere. Indeed, it is so common that holding modern epistemology responsible for its presence in our world—because it encourages abstract analysis of theories and arguments disengaged from vital understanding—would be as silly as if Socrates had blamed the presence of cheap talk in Athens on the teaching of rhetoric. It is not at the feet of incompetent educators than one first learns to engage in idle talk, to have opinions about everything, and to speak convincingly either without conviction or, prematurely, with too much of it. Such practices are a completely “normal,” everyday affair. We all play fast and loose with what we say—not because there is no connection between our understanding and our words, but because much of the time, our understanding of things just *is* quite shallow and ill-informed. Socrates calls this usual state of our understanding ignorance, and he laments this condition especially when it concerns the question of the Good Life. Yet I think he would lament even more the way the issue has come to be covered over by interpretations of ignorance that define it as having the wrong ideas, or a faulty epistemology, or an inability to properly “apply”



the right ideas using the right method. For our ideas, or rational powers, or methodologies—whatever they are—are only as good as how we “mean” them. “What we are *inclined* to say” or do constitutes “who” we are.

Buried in one of Guthrie’s footnotes is a quote from Confucius. It is cited without comment at the point where Guthrie notes that from the very beginning, Socrates’ interpreters seem to split off in the direction of either methodological skepticism or metaphysical realism, whereas he would have us ponder instead the significance of Socrates’ having left the question of the good life “unanswered.” Perhaps, Guthrie speculates

the man who came nearest to the aims of Socrates . . . was not a Greek at all, but a contemporary in a distant land who knew nothing of him. It was said of Confucius (*Analects*, 13.3) that when asked what he would do first if he were given charge of the administration of a country, he replied: “It would certainly be to correct language.” . . . His hearers were surprised, as he explained that if language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, what ought to be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and arts deteriorate, justice goes astray, and the people stand around in helpless confusion. With this may be compared the words given to Socrates by Plato, *Phaedo*, 115e: “You may be sure, my dear Cebes, that inaccurate language is not only in itself a mistake: it implants evil in men’s souls.”<sup>59</sup>

Those who comment on the passage usually interpret “using correct language” in terms of asserting true and avoiding false opinions/theories. But this completely misses the reversal of priority between what one says and the understanding that it comes from and partially expresses, which is what Socrates tries to effect. Only someone like Socrates (or Confucius)—that is, someone who sees that “saying what we really mean” can reveal to us and to those with whom we interact, whether we will it or not, the present condition of our vital understanding—could make such a sweeping claim about “inaccurate language.” For both recognize that *our lives* are run by what we really “mean,” not by “what one should say” and how cleverly or logically we “assert” it.

The idea that the origin of the power of speech resides in one’s vital understanding animates all of the Socratic dialogues—not only in his treatment of his interlocutors, but even in his notoriously non-dialogical treatment of Meletus in the *Apology*. There he announces, *before* speaking to him, what he is sure he already knows—namely, that Meletus is “guilty of bringing serious charges frivolously . . . and pretending zealous concern for things he never cared about.”<sup>60</sup> Socrates, in other words, understands what Meletus *means*. Meletus’ words will never express and are not intended to express anything of substance for the jury to deliberate about. What he “means” is, *I’ll say whatever might get the jury to convict*. Hence, Socrates



does not respond to Meletus' charges with lawyer-like skill. Nor does he "trap" him into saying foolish things.<sup>61</sup> The point is that Meletus' interest in persuasion is so great (and his concern for education and religion correspondingly so meager) that it is easy to get him to say stupid things—for example, that everyone else would be a better teacher, and that Socrates is both an atheist and an unorthodox believer—precisely because his understanding of education and religion is . . . stupid.<sup>62</sup>

In general, then, listening to *how* people say things allows Socrates to tell whether he is hearing childish inexperience, complacent enculturation, sophisticated one-upmanship, or well-meaning but ill-directed concern. He is therefore able to let himself be confronted by and learn from what little or much another life can teach him, no matter "how" his interlocutors mean what they say. The inquiries of Socrates do not go farther than this, in some metaphysical direction and for the sake of gaining total knowledge, because he is always concerned instead to go just far enough, existentially and on this occasion, for the sake of improving his understanding.

Unlike so many recent philosophers, Socrates does not "start with language"—in the sense of opinions, propositions, theories, and so on. The activity of theorizing, analyzing, arguing, and carefully processing information may appear as if it is all being conducted with studied neutrality and objectivity, diverted as much as possible from the existential origins of the things we say and the feelings we may have about them, and focused instead on their potentially universal cognitive content, its implications, and applications. And this is perhaps the most common way for academics to think—to become part of an imagined collection of minds, processing information, in an always inferior effort to compete with the computer. Unfortunately, this makes Socrates entirely unsuited to academic conversation, for he can never get it out of his mind that to speak as if in a studied, disembodied, "purely conceptual" voice is actually expressive of a self-deception. To speak this way does *not* mean we have actually put our vital understanding aside for the sake of "objective" communication. It is rather that for the moment, we enact one especially narrow and methodologically refashioned part of it. We have all been trained to *speak* and to *be* this way, but it is not something Socrates values much. As he tells his friends in the *Phaedo*, what he learned from associating with the early cosmologists is that they aspire to knowledge—but without any concern for wisdom.

Recall Taylor's observation, cited in the previous chapter, that "Ontogenetically" speaking, the "inarticulate end . . . of our gamut of articulation is the primary one. . . . We are introduced to the goods, and inducted into the purposes of our society much more and earlier through its inarticulate practices than through formulations" (PIH, 23). To be is to be "primarily" inarticulate, but this does not mean we are mostly living mute and without any understanding of how things are. Much is vitally understood, however little or much we have come to play it off against what and who we encounter. Taylor's point is also Nietzsche's. The problem with the search



for “knowledge” in the Western intellectual tradition is that this search is most commonly associated with an objectivist demand that we ignore as much as possible the lived-through sense of things out of which it has grown. Yet all that meeting this demand really accomplishes is that we thereby continue, without further “examination,” to live out the condition of “having been” that one has already—mostly silently, unreflectively, and problematically—inherited.

By contrast, Socrates’ wisdom-loving is never silent and unreflective in this objectivistic way. When he says to Crito, “I am an Athenian,” he is consciously calling upon his vital, Greekly oriented understanding in all its concrete, dialogically cultivated determinacy—a point he tries to explain with his image of an imagined dialogue with Athenian law.<sup>63</sup> I translate the nearly seventy-year-old Socrates’ explanation loosely as follows:

*I now realize that being an Athenian has not only enabled me to become the lover of wisdom that I am, but also that it now puts me in a position where, in spite of the unjust verdict, for me to take my show on the road and become a citizen of the world would be the worst kind of moral corruption. Of course, it is possible to speak as one sort of person and appear to be somebody else—like Meletus, claiming to be a defender of truth while actually just being a manipulator of attitudes. As for me, if I were escape my undeserved fate by fleeing to another city and yet continue to “proclaim” myself a lover of wisdom, I would really “be” the greatest sort of danger any city can face—a person who spends a lifetime giving priority to the examined life . . . until it gets too dangerous.*

In fact, then, Socrates is only playing with a hypothetical here. Given who he is, exile is never a “real” option. The jury’s verdict may have the effect of making it legally obligatory for him to stay in Athens and die; but it is his very Athenian existence, under precisely the newly altered conditions he is now living through, that gives him to *understand* that flight is “impossible.”<sup>64</sup>

Here, finally, we find a characterization of Socrates the Athenian who, much more than most of us, knows that one always starts (and stays) in the midst of things. He may not be *geschichtlich* in the modern, Western, allegedly democratic, twenty-first-century sense. But he is certainly quite well aware that his vital understanding is concretely historical in Nietzsche’s sense. And at least by time he comes to understand what the Delphic oracle meant, he is therefore fully capable of taking into account—in every conversation and with every type of interlocutor—how it is to “be” historical. Hence Socrates the Athenian is, for the purposes of this study of how history matters to philosophy, a very good place to start.



## NOTES

1. As in Chapter 1, I develop my thesis here against the interpretive tradition that has dominated English-language work since the middle of the last century. In this, I see myself as a North American emulating, say, the early Heidegger, who worked out the idea of what he would finally call *Geschichtlichkeit* in SZ against the background of the neo-Kantian, Hegelian, and theological traditions “in the midst” of which he began in the mid-teens of the last century. For work that more closely shares my thesis but not my strategy, see, e.g., Drew Hyland, *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004); and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
2. On the “Socratic Problem” generally, see Emile de Strycker and S.R. Slings, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with Running Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 1–25; and Mario Montuori, *The Socratic Problem: The History—The Solutions From the 18th Century to the Present Time, 61 Extracts from 54 Authors in Their Historical Context* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1992). For special reference to several ancient sources who, lamentably, no longer figure in the main discussions (i.e., Diogenes Laertius, Libanius, Maximus of Tyre, Apuleius), see William M. Calder III, et al., *The Unknown Socrates* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy Carducci, 2002).
3. See, e.g., Roslyn Weiss, *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” VSS, 40–48; Scott Austin, “The Paradox of Socratic Ignorance (How to Know That You Don’t Know),” *Philosophical Topics* 15, no. 1 (1987): 23–34; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, “The Paradox of Socratic Ignorance in Plato’s *Apology*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984): 125–31; and Michael J. O’Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 3–82.
4. “Of all those we knew in our time [he was] the bravest, wisest, and most upright of men” (*Phaedo*, 118a; cf. 116c).
5. I follow the common practice of extracting a portrait of Socrates from Plato’s early dialogues, supplemented by references to Aristotle, Xenophon, and others in ways consistent with the basic portrait. I am not, however, concerned with the so-called Problem of Socrates, i.e., of establishing whether the Socrates of the “early” dialogues is an accurate portrait of the historical person. As is often the case in English-language commentary, the way this problem is treated follows Vlastos. See, e.g., VSI, 45–106. Of course, Plato’s dialogues are not literal transcriptions—art, not journalism—where “art” means something like Aristotle’s “poetic art” in which the “real essence” of something is presented (Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., trans. by Hans Meyerhoff [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 158). For my purposes, however, it would not matter if, say, the *Apology* and *Euthyphro* were the last dialogues Plato produced before he died, or even if his account cannot be entirely trusted as historically accurate (as it is by Vlastos and many of his followers). For there is still, in the dialogues now typically called “earlier,” a Socrates that says and does all of the things that have produced the interpretations of what he says and does that I analyze here. On doubts as to whether the search for the “historical Socrates” might ever reward the effort, see V. Tejera, “What We Don’t Know about Plato and Socrates,” in *Rewriting the History of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. V. Tejera (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 105–19.



6. Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 2–3, 53–60.
7. W.D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 233; also 11–21, 225–26. Ross is still the most-cited modern commentator for Aristotle's view that a theory of separate Ideas must be ascribed entirely to Plato. See, contra, R.E. Allen, *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 145–47.
8. See, e.g., Michael N. Forster, "Socrates' Profession of Ignorance," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2007): 1–36. Forster, too, assumes that Socrates must be evaluated in terms of his beliefs, and if these seem obscure or elusive, that is evidence that he must have had a "divine source" for these beliefs (2). Sources used in these efforts at religification also include, e.g., Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); and James Beckman, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979).
9. *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 10, 17. George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates*, vol. 1, trans. John Russell (London: John Russell, 1865), 241–46, seems to be the modern inspiration for this conception of elenchus. Cf. Vlastos' rejection of the often-alleged sophistry of Socrates that is read into the negativity in this procedure, under the chapter title "Does Socrates Cheat," VSI, 132–56.
10. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, 225. For general discussion as to whether Socratic elenchus has a positive or constructive interest as well as a negative or destructive one, see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3–29.
11. John Gould, *The Development of Plato's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 15. Vlastos argues Gould's view is textually questionable and suspiciously modern in its assumptions, but he never asks what could have prompted Gould's taking such a position in the first place (*Platonic Studies*, 204–08). Terence H. Irwin's attempt to turn Socrates into an ethical "instrumentalist" is clearly too much for Vlastos, who objects strongly to the obvious presentism of this interpretation (VSI, 6–10). Vlastos refers to Irwin's *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. ch. 3; for a revised treatment to which Vlastos would nevertheless have had the same basic objection, see Irwin's *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52–77.
12. Thomas G. West, "Introduction" to his *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's 'Euthyphro,' 'Apology,' and 'Crito' and Aristophanes' 'Clouds,'* trans. Thomas G. and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9–41, quoted phrase, 11. See also his earlier "Defending Socrates and Defending Politics," *Interpretation* 11 (1983): 383–97. In *Plato's Socrates*, Brickhouse and Smith argue that while it is hard to settle upon the image of either a "democratic" or "oligarchic" Socrates on the basis of the early dialogues, a careful analysis shows that the real motivation behind Socrates' trial is not really political but religious (137–75). I.F. Stone, in *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), makes the most famous argument that it is political. As is typical of recent literature, however, these authors jump with both feet into considerations of "democratic" theory without asking either (a) whether it is correct to be looking for Socrates' "theory" about anything, let alone anything political, or (b) whether the sort of theorizing that we might be looking for today would have made any sense to Socrates or Plato, their friends, and their enemies.
13. Charles H. Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Classical Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1983), 90–93. Kahn's point, however,



- is not to come to a general conclusion about Socrates' own outlook, but to understand the various ways in which Plato uses Socratic devices for his own purposes. See, e.g., his *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
14. Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 98–101.
  15. Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, 135–36. This tack has recently been revived by, among others, Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998). I return to Nehamas and Gonzalez shortly.
  16. West, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 76. It is quite typical of those who interpret the elenchus negatively that they are really concerned with defending some theory or theories of Plato.
  17. See *The Art of Living*, 96, 98. According to Nehamas, Montaigne, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Foucault are all philosophers who have tried to emulate Socrates this way.
  18. See, e.g., Martha Nussbaum, who praises Nehamas for not following his own book's advice. "We are lucky that Nehamas does not really practice what he preaches, that he has not abandoned traditional scholarship and philosophy for an intellectual's dandyism. We can therefore learn from his work and admire it without subordinating our personalities to his" ("The Cult of Personality [review of Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living*]," *The New Republic* 220, nos. 1–2 [1999]: 37).
  19. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 447 [127]. Bracketed pages refer to the separately published section of the third volume, entitled *Socrates* (1971).
  20. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I: *The Spell of Plato* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 185–194, 306–313, 329; and Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction*, 6.
  21. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. E.S. Haldane (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), esp. 404–11. Nicholas White argues that in this regard, an analytic philosopher who seeks "the" method in Socrates is acting more than a little like Hegel. For both seem to believe that if Socrates doesn't have *some* sort of "systematic" philosophy—if not substantive, then at least epistemological—this would cast doubt on his being a philosopher at all ("Socrates in Hegel and Others," in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar [Oxford: Blackwell, 2006], 368–85). So much for the distinction between having and loving wisdom. . . .
  22. Brickhouse and Smith argue on the basis of their analyses of numerous texts that Socrates is not especially interested in "ordinary knowledge," but that even if this commits him to thinking of wisdom as the (humanly impossible) possession of "definitional knowledge," this does not bar him from saying he knows "something" concerning these definitions even if it can never measure up to fully possession (*The Philosophy of Socrates* [Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000], 99–121). I agree that this characterizes Socrates' position, but it does so only very abstractly. The real question is how one can have such a position, and my argument in this section is that interpretive strategies popular in the Anglophone tradition view philosophical activity in such a way that this question can never be answered.
  23. Guthrie, 447 [127]; see also the variant of this view in C.D.C. Reeve, who concludes that Socrates is simply disclaiming "expert" knowledge, while



- understanding that of course “Like his fellow Athenians [he] has nonexpert humdrum knowledge of what virtue is and what it is like.” See *Socrates in the ‘Apology’: An Essay on Plato’s ‘Apology of Socrates’* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 53–62, quote from 62.
24. See, e.g., Norman Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 62–74; and still more positively, W. Thomas Schmid, “Socrates’ Practice of Elenchus in the *Charmides*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1981): 141–46.
  25. See, respectively, Reginald Hackforth, *The Composition of Plato’s ‘Apology’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 148; and West, *Plato’s ‘Apology of Socrates’*, 119, 129–30. I.F. Stone’s *The Trial of Socrates* is perhaps the most famous continuation of the argument that Socrates was/is politically dangerous. Of course, one should add that an unsolved paradox will be an altogether happy fact for Socrates’ enemies.
  26. Forster, “Socrates’ Profession of Ignorance,” 30–31. The authority cited (9 n.12) for the idea that Socrates is still unproblematically both religious and philosophical is Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, 9th ed. (1946; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).
  27. VPS, 10. This essay is a revised republication of a 1957 lecture (1 n.) and was conceived at that time as “the private recollection of an aborted book” that was to bear the same name (VSI, 3).
  28. VPS, 10. Vlastos offers the *Crito* as the supreme example of this attitude. In VSI, however, it is no longer clear whether he supposes Socrates to have regarded Parmenidean knowledge in ethical matters as simply unattainable or as something he sought but failed to find. In either case, it is no longer central to Vlastos’ argument. I explain how I understand Socrates encounter with the Delphic oracle in section 4.
  29. VPS, 16. Vlastos means that Socrates had faith in knowledge, not that Socrates’ knowledge was faith. Cf. *Platonic Studies*, 210.
  30. VPS, 16. Vlastos’ later account reflects the same contemporary philosophical commitments, traceable to his “superannuated graduate student” days at Cornell, where he “ingested great gobs of analytic epistemology” (VSI, 17). His early interpretation is thoroughly taken to task for analytic bias by James Haden, “On Socrates, with Reference to Gregory Vlastos,” *Review of Metaphysics* 33, no. 2 (1979): 371–89. I share Haden’s criticisms but not his positive alternative, according to which the ideal of Socratic inquiry is the ability of an individual “to fuse within himself the personal and particular with the universal into a perfect union” (380), so that the “real paradox” of the Socratic dialogues turns out to be that “reason as suprahuman must be revered if we are to be truly human” (387–88). In this way, the presentism remains. Socrates is no more an onto-theological metaphysician than he is analytic philosopher. In addition, of course, Haden’s essay comes too early to take on the revisions in Vlastos’ later account in VSI and elsewhere.
  31. VSI, 4; also, VSS, 40 n. 4. Vlastos makes no substantive distinction between Socrates and Dewey on this score. He makes only the epistemic distinction, viz., that Dewey does and Socrates does not eschew certainty on the explicitly methodological grounds of an instrumentalist logic (VSS, 62). Beyond this, Vlastos seems to assume throughout that what he earlier calls Socrates’ rejection of *deductive* certainty is the same as what he later calls Socrates’ renunciation of *epistemic* certainty. This assumption would of course be rejected, for opposite reasons, by both (say) Descartes and Dewey.
  32. VSS, 49. Vlastos cites VSS, which initially appeared in 1985, as presenting his formulation of the notion of complex irony for the first time (VSI, 31 n. 32).



33. "Is the 'Socratic Fallacy' Socratic," in *Socratic Studies*, 67. I ignore the fact that Vlastos often treats "pitting a claim against its contradictory" as involving the display of inconsistency between a claim and "a conjunction of agreed-upon premises" rather than just one other contradictory claim (VSS, 11, 22–25).
34. "The Socratic Elenchus: The Method Is All," in *Socratic Studies*, 11. This paper was instrumental in spawning a virtual industry in Anglophone circles and has been so powerfully attractive that not only those who are critical of it, but even those who have doubts about the very idea that Socrates had one general method, tend to organize their thoughts against the background of Vlastos' position. See, e.g., the editor's introduction to *Does Socrates Have A Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 1–16.
35. See, e.g., Hugh Benson, "The Dissolution of the Problem of the Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1995): 45–112. In retrospect, Vlastos tried to correct for this impression that his account is really just an account of the sort of thing Socrates does in one dialogue, but his strategy amounts to reasserting its generality and explaining its absence away in dialogues that don't follow it. See "Postscript to 'The Socratic Elenchus,'" in *Socratic Studies*, 33–37.
36. *Socratic Studies*, 8–11. The balance, however, is clearly on the logical side. For example, in passing Vlastos makes the revealing remark that the reason why there is such a "motley variation" of the basic pattern of the elenctic method is due to its allowing for "the waywardness of impromptu debates"—as if, alas, philosophy finds life too sloppy for it (11).
37. VSI, 45. For Santas, see n. 14.
38. *Plato's Socrates*, 29. Also, the paper cited in the next note.
39. "The Socratic *Elenchos*?" in Scott, *Does Socrates Have A Method?*, 147, 154–56. The authors refer in this context to McPherran's *The Religion of Socrates*, but it is not clear that he would concur with their statement about "what he [i.e., Socrates] was."
40. The idea goes back at least to his original version of "The Socratic Elenchus," which is discussed in VSI (133–35), and is strengthened in the *Socratic Studies* version of the 1983 article (7–8).
41. VPS, 21. I ignore both the sexist language of this thirty-five-year-old concluding paragraph (i.e., Vlastos calls claiming the right to make one's own judgments achieving "manhood"), and also a certain vagueness of reference. The grammar of Vlastos' actual assertions would make Socrates "vision of freedom" itself the thing to be called faith rather than knowledge, but his clear intention is to be characterizing the results of exercising this freedom. Cf. *Platonic Studies*, 207–8.
42. *Art of Living*, 9–10, 96–97. Indeed, when he is later challenged on this, he asserts that failing to see this point is the sign of a fundamental lack of philosophical humility ("A Reply to Francisco J. Gonzalez: Living Well Is Hard to Do," *Salmagundi* (2000): 128, 129, 308–9)!
43. This fact about the Socrates of the early dialogues, claims Nehamas, is precisely what drove Plato, in his middle dialogues, to refashion his conception of Socrates from an incurably paradoxical figure of the early dialogues—by developing "most of the ambitious resources that characterize the systematic thought that continues to dominate philosophy up to our own time" (69). Readers will note that many of my quotations from Nehamas come from his introduction. This is because, when authors give no reflective account of their own philosophical orientation, it is easier to discern what it is when they are explaining what they plan to do rather than when they are actually doing it.



44. C.C.W. Taylor, "Socrates the Sophist," in *Remembering Socrates: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Lindsay Judson and Vassilis Karasmanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 167–68.
45. There are throwaway lines for each of these, respectively, in *Platonic Studies*, 205 n. 1; "The Socratic Elenchus," 1–2, 25; and VSI, 44.
46. In *The Virtue of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's 'Charmides'* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), Drew Hyland argues persuasively that what is usually translated as temperance (*σώφροσύνη*) is really something more like a quality Heidegger attributes to genuine "thinking," viz., the orientation he calls "responsive openness" (11–17, 89–91). This is, I think, clearly a characteristic of the dialogical practice through which Socrates is able to continually improve his vital understanding—a characteristic that is often only superficially construed in the wake of all the talk of Socratic paradox and disclaimers of knowledge. I do not think, however, that Hyland establishes his further claim that the Eros which expresses itself in this stance must be construed in terms of the familiar Platonic "move toward completeness" (14) and coupled with the presumption that Socrates sees human life as "both comic and tragic" and sees wisdom as the pursuit of "a worthy but impossible goal," viz., "knowledge of the whole." See Michael H. Miller's review and Hyland's reply, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1982): 162–66, esp. 165. Hyland develops this claim at much greater length in *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995). In general, he seems to assume that the love that animates "self-knowing, responsive openness" must be understood as the desire for divine knowledge. I leave open the question of whether Plato sees things this way. For Socrates, I offer an alternative that makes that love a function of "vital understanding"—which, to be sure, is in each of us incompletable, but not because it is tragically finite.
47. The terms and tenor of the following analysis have, of course, been developed with an eye toward Gadamer's hermeneutics and especially the early Heidegger's notion of the fore-structure of *Verstehen*. For now, however, I would prefer that this be ignored and the analysis read on its own, since my point at the moment is simply to prepare for the later discussion of Heidegger's notion of historicity, in which the fore-structure of understanding plays an important role. I might note, however, that the Socrates I discuss in this section is not rightly perceived as deeply complicit in the development of Western metaphysics. Most Continentally oriented commentators tend to give unsympathetic, at least somewhat Platonist (and thus, Heidegger's sense, "metaphysical") accounts of Socrates/Plato. See, e.g., Drew A. Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*. The other route would be to follow up Heidegger's remarks, e.g., about Socrates being the "purest thinker in the West" (*What Is Called Thinking?* trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray [New York: Harper and Row, 1968], 17), and about his being "no moralist" who looks for "ethical principles," but instead someone concerned with "the understanding of *Dasein*'s knowledge and action in general" (GA 22:92–93/75).
48. VPS, 20. See, e.g., *Crito*, 49d; *Laches*, 187e–188a; and *Protagoras*, 331c. Gadamer reminds us of a famous passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1004b, 20–26, which he reads as saying, "The difference between dialectic and sophism consists only in . . . that the dialectician takes seriously those things which the sophist uses solely as the material for his game of winning arguments and proving himself right." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 5–6.
49. Hyland explains this passage by drawing on the Platonic notion of the human psyche as "mediator . . . between Ideas and phenomena" (*Virtue of*



*Philosophy*, 100ff). As an account of *what Socrates is doing*, however, this seems implausibly “Platonic.” Does the Socrates of the early dialogues see himself this way—that is, does he understand his confession of ignorance, his questions, and all of the strategies of his conversations as being primarily for the purpose of bringing Ideas and phenomena together? Does he really start his dialogues as if he were already equipped with a theory of Ideas on the one hand and encountered phenomena on the other, thus bent on getting a proper fit between them? Substitute “Socratic method” for “theory of Ideas,” and we have Vlastos.

50. *Apology*, 21b, 23a–b. Once one ignores the dialogical process by which Socrates moves from his initial reaction to his final conclusion about the oracle’s meaning, it is easy to regard Socrates’ initial surprise as a “pose,” as does James Beckman, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates’ Thought*, 72. One of the most famous examples of this line of thinking is Burnet’s claim that Socrates initially had so little regard for the source of the statement that he “set out to prove the god a liar,” and it was “only when he had discovered its hidden meaning . . . that he felt disposed to champion the god of Delphi.” See John Burnet, ed., *Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), comments to *Apology*, 21b8, 22a7 (172, 174). There is, moreover, a certain sense in which Socrates’ original superlative construction of the “obviously” comparative pronouncement is prescient—even if this, too, becomes clear only in retrospect. For did he not find after all that he was indeed something singular, both in his philosophizing and in his service to Athens, even if that singularity was empirical rather than cosmically necessary?
51. Of course, it is important to emphasize that Socrates can only treat this as an apparent contradiction, both because it would be unsocratic for Socrates to insist upon the correctness of his own self-understanding when it is so deeply challenged, and also because a pronouncement from Apollo cannot “really” be wrong. Hence, Socrates sets out to confront all those other apparently wiser Athenians so that he “might refute the surface meaning of the divination to approach accurate understanding of it” (Sandra Peterson, *Socrates and Philosophy in the Dialogues of Plato* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 20, and the literature cited there).
52. For a more detailed account of Socrates’ dialogues as constituting an “interpretation” of the oracle, see John Sallis, *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), 46–54.
53. Though perhaps not conclusive, it is worth mentioning that the motto in the pronaos of the Delphic oracle, “know yourself” (γνώθι σεαυτόν), speaks of “knowledge” with a word derived from γινώσκω (to learn, come to know, understand), which is a root for neither τέχνη nor επιστήμη. Hyland argues that the point of Socrates’ discussion with Critias on the meaning of the oracle’s saying is that σοφροσύνη cannot be adequately conceived as either some sort of common sense instinct, or τέχνη or επιστήμη (*Virtue of Philosophy*, 113–14), but involves this different kind of knowing/understanding. Aristotle, when speaking of the lack of education that causes people to ask for demonstrations where they are not appropriate, uses the same “Delphic” term. See *Metaphysics*, 1106a, 4–11; and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, 12–29. Cf. John Lyons, *Structural Semantics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 187ff.
54. Kierkegaard is half right in observing that Socrates’ “contentment” is a sign he “had no deeper speculative need.” But others, he also says, “could not enjoy this freedom in ironic satisfaction [!]” and thus made his life “merely the condition for a new standpoint.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. by Lee M. Capel



- (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 200–202. Consider also the suggestion that the *Apology* (with its unique focus upon the general meaning of Socrates' activities) is the one dialogue that gives Plato no opportunity to push his own more "scientific" interests. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. William Dobson (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 134–36.
55. See John Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates: A Defense of the Interlocutors in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
  56. In addition to reliance on the "say what you mean" principle, Beversluis specifically attacks (among other things) the assumptions that Socrates cares about the state of his interlocutors' souls, that the elenchus is philosophically valuable, that we can safely ignore the narrow and elitist nature of the class of persons Socrates is willing to talk to, and in general, that what we have in the dialogues is "St. Socrates." But what he does not question, and what most reviews of his book ignore is the degree to which his position remains very much in-house—above all, in its ahistorical evaluation of arguments. One of the few reviewers to complain about the latter is Carol Poster, in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 22, no. 2 (2002).
  57. *Cross-Examining Socrates*, 37–58, quoted phrase, 58. It goes without saying, of course, that one cannot understand how Socrates' tactics could have an "existential" purpose, if one is analyzing the tactics in themselves instead of in terms of who is using them, on what occasion, and as what sort of person. What Socrates "ignores" or gives relatively more or lesser weight to in Crito's remarks, e.g., might better be read in terms of what kind of life is entailed by accepting them. Is it really a philosophical "failure" that Socrates did not reply to Crito's implied accusation that it is cowardly ("the easy way") not to flee Athens' unjust sentence (*Crito*, 45e)?
  58. *Crito*, 46b, 46d; cf. 48b–c, my emphasis. The concreteness of this dialogue famously escapes A.D. Woozley, who confesses that because "the issues it raises about what it is to live in society subject to law are immense," one is easily "taken away from the text" of the *Crito*. See *Law and Obedience: The Arguments of Plato's 'Crito'* (London: Duckworth, 1979), 5. The results of this inattention are typical, and typically presentist: "The arguments given in the *Crito* . . . are interestingly bad rather than uninterestingly good" (vii). See also his earlier article in Vlastos, VPS, 299–318. Richard Kraut's subsequent study of "the political theory Socrates adopts" when he refuses to escape—though much more thorough and textually sensitive—follows the same general pattern, so that, e.g., one gets a whole section on the "logic" of the "persuade or obey doctrine" (*Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton: University Press, 1984), 3 n. 1, 54–90).
  59. *History* III, 488 [168] n. 1.
  60. *Apology*, 26c. Burnet thinks that Socrates is accusing Meletus of playing a kind of "solemn farce," in which one has to imagine that he is delivering funny lines deadpan (Burnet, 186); and West accuses him of engaging in trickery, *Plato's Apology*, 137.
  61. Indeed, at the very beginning of the *Apology*, the first thing Socrates does is tell the jury, with tongue in cheek, that Meletus been so good at using the familiar language of moral condemnation to rile up old prejudices that even *he* almost forgot who he is and how what they said is false (17a).
  62. Brickhouse and Smith defend Socrates' strategy, but they see it as carried out primarily in terms of Meletus's lack of seriousness being exposed in the silly things he is willing to say (Brickhouse and Smith, *Routledge Philosophy*



*Guidebook to Plato and the Trial of Socrates* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 105–20). The idea that this lack of seriousness itself contrasts Meletus’ “understanding” of such matters with Socrates’ own is implied but not discussed. In the end, Brickhouse and Smith have difficulty believing that this sort of seemingly *ad hominem* approach can be all that Socrates is doing. “So long as Socrates’ interrogation of Meletus involves no actual argument against the truth of the charges . . . it is no more than a diversion. . . . The issue is not whether Meletus can survive a clever cross-examination without becoming flustered and foolish-looking; the issue is whether or not his charges are true” (*Socrates on Trial*, 116). In my view, Socrates is treating the jury as a kind of collective interlocutor and is thereby leaving open the possibility that at least some of them might benefit from his speech by, on this occasion, becoming just. In the view of Brickhouse and Smith, the jurors are there to evaluate Meletus’ claims and determine their warrant. If no “actual arguments” are present, we can have “diversion,” but no philosophy.

63. I do not discuss Socrates’ politics here for the same reason that I say nothing about Socrates and science—because I would first have to dismantle the initial presentism in these questions that I have, in this chapter, tried to do with ignorance, knowledge, and dialogue. To take one example, much of the discussion of whether Socrates believed in “democracy” has been embarrassingly insensitive to this point—showcased especially in the recent exchanges over I. F. Stone’s book. Thus, Irwin and Vlastos, for all their concern about the “historicity” of Socrates (i.e., how much do we know about the actual Socrates and his “beliefs”), never analyze the degree to which even posing a question like “Was Socrates against Democracy?” (the title of one of Irwin’s papers) evokes a late modern atmosphere that—even without much empirical information about his life—we know Socrates would have found unintelligible. See, e.g., Irwin’s paper in *Plato’s ‘Euthyphro,’ ‘Apology,’ and ‘Crito’: Critical Essays*, ed. Rachana Kamtekar (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 127–49; and for a critical account of Vlastos, Malcolm Schofield, “I. F. Stone and Gregory Vlastos on Socrates and Democracy,” *Apeiron* 33, no. 4 (2001): 281–301. Moreover, here is a place where I think the more timely hermeneutical move is to explicate an experience of remoteness from Socrates. At least for most of us in North America and Western Europe, to be historical is to be within a milieu that is predominantly technoscientific and democratic-capitalist, with an essentially objectivistic sense of what is real and an essentially voluntaristic sense of what to do about it. Of this world, and of the prominence of science, technology, and moral-political (in the narrow sense of a specific sort of human activity) theorizing, Socrates can tell us nothing—except to *start from within it*, because any other stance is misconceived from the start.
64. I add the qualifying phrase to avoid the misunderstanding that there are no conditions under which Socrates might consider fleeing. Athens in the sixth century BCE is not, say, Nazi Germany or Vichy France.



### 3 Descartes Contra Cartesianism

#### The Historical Determinateness of “Meditation”

In spite of appearances, then, Plato’s early dialogues tell us of a Socrates who understands and takes for granted the historical determinateness of philosophical thinking. In his insistence that he is an Athenian, in his putting everything he thinks he already knows at risk in every new dialogue, in his refusal to put anything above his continuing commitment to search for the truth about how to live (even at and after his trial), he shows that he recognizes *how history matters in his own philosophizing*. As I explained earlier, my strategy in this first part of the book is to *show* how it matters, by discussing a sampling of thinkers who are famously supposed to serve as living proof that it does not or need not matter. One such thinker is Socrates. Another is Descartes, whose *Meditations on First Philosophy* has long been taken as a veritable handbook on how to become an unsituated, ahistorical thinker.

In this chapter, I argue that in spite of the strong presence in his writings of the imagery of the “Cartesian” ideal of a perfectly presuppositionless, self-possessed thinker from Nowhere, Descartes himself fails to become a Cartesian. More precisely, I discuss why he must fail. It is true that Descartes frequently offers “Cartesian” characterizations of his research plan. But the very existence of the *Meditations* gives away the whole show, for it is the story of how a very “resolute” but not yet Cartesian philosopher tries and ultimately cannot achieve such purity. Descartes the pre-Cartesian philosopher and ultimately only partially Cartesian meditator is a Descartes that Rorty, like many other analytic philosophers before him (and many followers of Kierkegaard and Heidegger as well), do not find.<sup>1</sup> But he is there to be found, and I enlist his (perhaps unwilling) help in celebrating the impossibility of the epistemic objectivism of which Cartesians, then and now, can only dream.

#### THE CARTESIAN PROJECT OF PURE INQUIRY

I begin with a few observations about the standard view of Descartes. If one reads the *Discourse on Method*, what could be more obvious—and more



Cartesian—than what Descartes himself actually says about his intentions? Isn't the goal of his *Meditations* to establish THE basic principles of a science of right reasoning about nature, and doesn't the pursuit of this goal require that he first set the past (in the form of all his "previous beliefs") aside? And doesn't Descartes say that history ultimately gets in the way of philosophy? Indeed, he even says of his plans to write in French and not just Latin because—as his forced option has it—one expects better justice from those who use only "natural reason" than from those who rely on "the writings of the ancients."<sup>2</sup>

All true. Descartes does *appear* to understand the task of philosophy as guided by a twofold "Cartesian" imperative. Philosophy must begin as purified epistemology, and its results can only flow from a thoroughly ahistorical standpoint of inquiry. The whole enterprise is, in Bernard Williams' phrase, a "project of pure inquiry," which we can define as

the undertaking of someone setting aside all externalities or contingent limitations on the pursuit of truth . . . to make an attempt to ground the *absolute conception of reality* which [real] knowledge seems to call for. . . . It is a matter not just of overcoming limitations on enquiry and hence occasional error . . . but of overcoming any systematic bias or distortion or partiality in our outlook as a whole, in our representation of the world: overcoming it, that is to say, in the sense of gaining a standpoint (the *absolute standpoint*) from which it can be understood in relation to reality, and comprehensively related to other conceivable representations.<sup>3</sup>

This "absolutely" self-possessed, generic standpoint of inquiry has been variously labeled neutral, scientific, objective, logical, transcendental, reconstructive, God-like, and as-if-from-Nowhere. Each name stresses differently its alleged benefits, but what is assumed by all of them is basically the same. If we are to have real knowledge of the real world, not only philosophy's leading *subject matter*—namely, the epistemic conditions for an "absolute conception of reality"—but also the philosophical orientation for the proper *analysis* of this subject matter must be free of any influence from either past thinking, present culture, or the psychology of particular minds. To drive home the necessity of seeing philosophical practice in this objectivistic light, Williams makes sure we understand that the rejection of this view would leave us with nothing but skepticism, relativism, historicism—in short, pre-modern, epistemic disaster.

For most of the English-speaking philosophical world, the fullest and sharpest expression of this absolute standpoint is maintained by logical empiricism.<sup>4</sup> In Reichenbach's phrasing, for example, philosophy may have no choice but to start with the empirical record of actual knowers, but that is no reason for it to remain there. Of course, he says, there already exists a "system of [scientific] knowledge . . . built up by generations of



thinkers”; but the philosopher’s job is to ask “What kind of knowledge is this, really?” and thus to shift focus quickly from the “sociological fact” of scientific knowing to the “essential” logical “foundations and structure” that make this knowing successful. The main purpose of philosophy is thus to “rationally reconstruct” the actual practice of science in order to spell out the “justifiable sets of operations” it uses when it gets things right. Epistemology, says Reichenbach, provides a “logical substitute” for the “real processes” of actual practice. Logic, he says, just *is* this “analysis of science” and “expresses nothing else.”<sup>5</sup>

Today, of course, no one seeks the kind of “logical substitution” that Reichenbach and his colleagues tried to make. Less criticized but just as important, however, is the imperious tone they took in trying to make it. What sort of philosopher assumes without argument that all real knowledge is (*natural*) *scientific* knowledge? From what source comes the confidence that rational reconstruction is even a viable project, let alone that one can be expert at it? From what viewpoint is one able to be, first, a sociologist of knowledge and then a rational reconstructivist of science—all the while understanding precisely the difference between these two practices and precisely how to move from one to the other? The intellectual and existential self-possession of the rational reconstructivist seems truly extraordinary.

Yet this extraordinary image can, and in spite of the demise of positivism still often does, seem quite ordinary—indeed, so ordinary that it escapes notice. For at bottom, as I argued in the first chapter, it is in fact nothing more than an especially rigorous variation on long-standing Cartesian themes. Is it not the case that genuine knowledge is building up in the sciences? And is it not obvious that a “logic of the sciences” would help them grow cognizant of themselves by making explicit the epistemic conditions for the possibility of their success? Logical empiricists were neither the only philosophers nor the last ones to draw this conclusion. Reichenbach’s “philosophers of the old school . . . trained in literature and history” instead of in science have made no comeback in the profession since the demise of logical empiricism. Indeed, nowadays, people trained in literature and history that possess “philosophical” interests are in English and history departments. Analytic philosophy in Urmsen’s “classical sense” may now seem excessively “rigorous” to its second and third generation practitioners, but the language, structure, and applications of scientific knowledge are still the primary sources for effective metaphors and models of right reason and successful action.

In short, long after the demise of logical empiricism as a movement, its image of the “scientific philosopher” continued to function in the background as a professional ideal. Here is the sort of philosopher who finally and successfully revises and articulates Descartes’ double legacy—by strictly adhering to his imperative to conceive both philosophy’s primary topic and its proper standpoint ahistorically. In English-language philosophy, until very recently, this seemed either precisely right (to the majority) or precisely



wrong (to those few who had the misfortune to study on the Continent and take the likes of Kierkegaard and Sartre seriously). After all, a mind that lays out and successfully follows (a properly updated version of) Descartes' four Rules of Method *would* have no standpoint other than the one it constructs for itself on a foundation of self-validating certainties. And this *would* truly appear to be no "standpoint" at all. Even opponents of this Cartesianism still often tend to express their opposition by granting that we can assume such a standpoint but at least sometimes ought not to—and thus continue to be marginalized whenever they make the wrong choice.

Today, of course, no one is a logical positivist or empiricist—or at least, not out loud and by self-description. If we ponder a relationship to logical empiricism at all, it is negatively. The positivist era is over, and we are all postpositivists. Yet given the long and complex legacy of Descartes' two imperatives, we should perhaps be more suspicious of any easy presumptions about what and how much has been overcome. Williams, for example, begins his analysis of the *Meditations* with a frank declaration of how little of Descartes' original project he accepts. My reading, he announces, is "a *rational reconstruction* . . . conceived in a contemporary [analytic] style" (PPE, 10; my emphasis). I reject, he says, the very possibility of a completely "pure" and ahistorical inquiry, as well as the idea of a "transparently rational mind" that such inquiry seems to presuppose; and I reject Descartes' ideal of certainty and conclude that without it, there is also no need to look for any theological-transcendental guarantee of knowledge. At the same time, however, Williams expresses strong approval of "Descartes' *aspiration* for an absolute conception [of reality] which abstracts from local and distorted representations of the world," and he asserts that this is what natural science—and only natural science—attempts to give us.<sup>6</sup> I note that there is absolutely no evidence that Williams feels self-conscious in describing PPE as a rational reconstruction.

There is, in other words, considerable if obviously unintended irony in Williams' denial that his approach to the *Meditations* is anachronistic. As radically revisionist and post-Cartesian as his reconstructive interpretation may seem to him, it is with precisely the attitude of a self-possessed and decontextualized "scientific philosopher" that he picks and chooses among the various aspects of Descartes' position. In fact, like the logical empiricists of the previous generation, he agrees with Descartes that the very possibility of objective truth seems to require an "absolute" conception of knowledge; he characterizes this conception as a "determinate picture of what the world is like independent of any knowledge or representation in thought"; he insists that one feature of this picture must be a sharp distinction between primary (really real) and secondary (only apparent) qualities; and he holds that philosophy must employ this picture both to define the world's availability to ideal observers and to explain the "merely local" representations of observers who have not properly "abstracted" from their "tastes and interests" to their sheer physical encounter with nature. Finally, he embraces



a version of his predecessors' pinched naturalism by cautioning that the objectivist ideal should be expected to motivate physical but probably not social science; and he concludes that we must simply admit the incurably perspectival and "non-objective" character of ethics.<sup>7</sup> There you have it. Nineteenth-century physics is the model for "objective" knowledge . . . but of course one must admit the existence of some sort of "subjective" valuation process. All the details are matters left to epistemological epicycles. For this display of unquestioned Cartesian self-confidence, Putnam singles Williams out as a good example of why analytic philosophy needs a radical revitalization that would finally overcome its inherited tendencies to be "either scientific or irresponsibly metaphysical."<sup>8</sup>

I share the recent and growing consensus that, contra Williams, this familiar imagery of standpointless epistemic success—even if it reflects the sentiments of many of Descartes' more programmatic pronouncements about his philosophical ideal—does not capture the spirit of his own actual descriptions of the meditative process. What I want to stress, however, is that the un-Cartesian Descartes that one can find in the *Meditations* not only fails to achieve Cartesian success, but would never sign up for Williams' "project of pure inquiry" in the first place. This is the Descartes whose voice we hear, not in his programmatic remarks, but in the *Meditations*' running commentary on how the inquiry process is actually going, as well as in the *Discourse*, where he tells us about all the topics he plans to "set aside" before he turns to meditation. When this Descartes reports his doubts, unclarities, backslidings, lacks of comprehension, and failures of attention, he is not merely acknowledging his failure to become the pure inquirer he is trying to be. He is denying *to his own reflections concerning the possibility of such inquiry* precisely the allegedly sought-after status of pure Cartesian inquirer. And he is giving voice instead to another kind of philosophical outlook—a different, quite un-Cartesian, outlook—from which it is just as important to describe *how* one knows as to analyze *what* one knows. This is the un-Cartesian Descartes—that is, historically determinate thinker who remains in the midst of things—that I want to enlist in my present study. This Descartes stands before us as a counterthrust to the Cartesian Descartes, one that remains an impure and imperfect knower, an embodied and contextualized inquirer who realizes that even the most "resolute" use of his method will never turn him into a Pure Mind applying Pure Rules.

I do not contend, of course, that Descartes ever explicitly embraces this image of finite, impure, utterly human rationality. But *we* can do so, just as the previous chapter shows that we can go back and reconsider Socrates' vital understanding of being in the midst of things. The Descartes who is not a Cartesian—even while advising us to become one—might today help us unlearn his programmatic advice. Merleau-Ponty once suggested that we might begin to dismantle the Cartesian legacy by "grant[ing] a positive signification" to the finite character of the thinking that Descartes the meditator actually displays.<sup>9</sup>



Of course, in the heyday of logical positivism, Merleau-Ponty's interpretive suggestion seemed strange indeed. Traditional philosophers were then treated either with condescension (as somewhat backward contemporaries) or as being of "merely" historical interest.<sup>10</sup> As I noted in Chapter 1, the philosophical tradition is now certainly better treated. "Anachronism" or "presentism" is a charge to be taken seriously. In some circles, it is even respectable to argue that philosophy never really got as free from its inheritance as the positivists wanted everyone to believe. (Where, e.g., did the rational reconstructivists get the idea that Science must have An Essence?) Descartes has clearly benefited from this change. He is no longer routinely identified as just the first modern, or the founder of rationalism and the reason there had to be a Locke, or the purveyor of a metaphysics and a method that today are merely to be criticized or avoided. Yet especially in the Anglo-American tradition, Descartes still tends to be construed so much in terms of current epistemic controversies that the very un-Cartesian character of his own meditation is obscured.<sup>11</sup> Margaret Wilson once complained that Descartes seemed to have "little understanding of, or respect for, the concept of formalization."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it would be better to say that the founder of analytic geometry had a great deal of respect for formalization, but not as a metaphor for what is to be accomplished in *philosophical* reflection.

It is this reflective, meditative, and non-formal Descartes to whom I now turn. If we ask explicitly, as Descartes did not, *How is it to think 'meditatively'?* we can see him defending a way of thinking about figure, number, and nature that demands requirements of clarity, precision, and formality which his own meditation can never meet. By focusing on those moments in the *Meditations* when Descartes seems satisfied to remain a real and finite thinker—a "*medium quid* between God and nothingness," as he says—we can catch him in a reflective mood where he realizes that even the most "resolute" use of his method against habitual cognitive tendencies will never completely dislodge them. To characterize this reflective mood properly, we will have to reverse Williams' phrase. For this Descartes, meditative *inquiry*—though, he hopes, not the kind of thinking whose foundations are to be established by means of this inquiry—will remain forever *impure*. Here is the Descartes who famously wants readers who "meditate with" him. Those intent on "reconstructing" his "arguments" with a formalist's eye may know a lot, but they will understand nothing. Only co-meditators can see what is philosophically most striking about meditation—namely, that the inescapably determinate conditions of any inquiry always place us "between" perfect truth and sheer blankness.

Co-meditators today, of course, have a much more complicated task than Descartes assigned to them. Co-meditators have always had the job of actually following Descartes' order of reasons in order to understand and to make the direction of his thought their own. But today's co-meditators must do this against the background of an awareness both of Descartes' own argumentative failures and of the negative (not just his contemporaneously



projected positive) consequences of aspiring to do philosophy in a Cartesian fashion. Descartes himself could not pursue the striking fact that his meditation is impure and finite, because his pioneering and original inquiry is, in its explicitly stated methodological strategy, pointed away from his own reflective practice and what its failures and limitations could have told him. Today, things are otherwise. We find ourselves differently situated, and we understand that Cartesianism, or objectivism, far from “improving” on imperfect meditation, may well constitute a doomed tradition of ill-conceived efforts to remove its essential limitations. I cannot review the whole case here, but I can offer some textual justification for the idea that the meditating Descartes is in principle an enemy of the familiar and comfortable imagery of the pure and disengaged inquirer.

### IMPURE MEDITATION VERSUS PURE INQUIRY

What, then, is the ‘meditation’ that Descartes actually practices? We should note, first, that it is not the introspective reporting of tickles, itches, pains, and mental acts—a kind of private psychological operation, focused on a present empirical state. Perhaps this should by now be self-evident, but in fact there remains a strong tendency in some circles to conflate meditative reflectiveness and introspection. Typically, something called “(Cartesian) self-knowledge”—that is, information about our own thoughts, feelings, and volitions, presumably obtained by a kind of “inward inspection” and accounted for in “folk-psychological” terms—is construed as preceding, or supplementing, or even competing with everything from brain physiology to psychoanalysis and sociology.<sup>13</sup>

Descartes is engaged in something that is at once both narrower and more universal but also less personal than this familiar empirical operation. Meditation is narrower, because the only features of one’s current mental condition that concern Descartes are those that facilitate or retard the acquisition of our knowledge of figure, number, and nature. It is also more universal and less personal, because the knowledge to be attained has no special relation to Descartes himself but is supposed to be, like the mathematical knowledge he grew to admire at La Flèche, unconditioned by anything but the absolute test of clarity and distinctness.

How, then, should meditation be understood? We know at least that it is supposed to be a self-critical affair—a reflective monitoring of one’s thinking about nature, under the “resolute” guidance of a model of truth extrapolated from mathematics. Moreover, the fact that meditation is always focused on “one’s own” course of thinking is as important to Descartes as the idea that it seeks certainty. He cautions us that in the *Principles of Philosophy*, he reasons “synthetically”—that is, simply *from* given principles *to* deduced conclusions. In the *Meditations*, however, his procedure is “analytical.” The problem, he explains, is that when the synthetic method is used,



people are overly impressed by the fact that the reasoning is deductive, and as a result, often think that they have learned more in following it than is in fact the case. The analytical method, however, avoids this danger. For this method “shows the true way by means of which the thing was discovered,” and this allows the attentive reader to “make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he discovered it for himself.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet to contemporary ears, even postpositivist ones, Descartes’ “personalized” account of his quest for certainty can sound formally sloppy and psychologically indulgent—that is, insensitive to the importance of keeping epistemic essentials separate from contingent psychic details. Moreover, this apparent insensitivity seems to be present both within and outside the *Meditations*. In the *Rules*, for example, Descartes says that his greatest philosophical pleasure “has always come not from accepting the arguments of others but from *discovering* arguments by *my own* efforts.”<sup>15</sup> But what does epistemic analysis have to do with such pleasures, or with reforming a particular person’s thoughts, or with the process of learning to accept “the” criteria of thinking as “my own”? Surely epistemology needs no help from autobiography.

We should be cautious, however, about using our contemporary instincts here. Indeed, from Descartes’ standpoint, a false dichotomy is at work in them. For us, it is second nature to privilege the objective structure of thought as such and set aside the contingencies of one’s own or another’s actual thinking. But this is not so for Descartes, who speaks throughout of “reforming” *his* thoughts. Consider, for example, the famous assertion of methodological resolve in Meditation One. Realizing that he must learn to withhold assent not only from obviously false beliefs but from all beliefs that are in any degree uncertain, Descartes concludes that

it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep returning . . . [to re-]capture my belief, which is bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. . . . [So, I must] turn my will in completely the opposite direction, and . . . pretend for a time that these former opinions are [not, as they in fact appear, “highly probable,” but rather] utterly false and imaginary.<sup>16</sup>

Descartes’ famous hyperbolic doubt is clearly motivated here, not by any interest in doing battle with philosophical skeptics, nor by any recognition of the inner logical necessities of his first rule, but by the desire to *retrain his own mind*—that is, to discard the orientation of an ordinary believer for that of a disciplined knower.<sup>17</sup>

The regimen for this retraining is well known. In everyday life, one simply tries to avoid obvious falsity and settles for probability. Our orientation toward the world is mostly sensuous and basically trusting. We seem to know when we are in the presence of real things, and we appear to be in



possession of sufficiently reliable and “customary” criteria for knowledge about them. Descartes’ main difficulty with this everyday state of affairs has little to do with any of our particular beliefs or with the fact we often have good reasons to doubt many of them.<sup>18</sup> Rather, he is concerned about the general and pervasive effect on all our thinking of *maintaining* a fundamentally naïve, sensuous, and probabilistic orientation toward our surroundings. Given our usually *being in the midst* of this ordinary, sensual/wakeful orientation, the only way to neutralize the pull of “highly probable” opinions is to initiate a radical, hypothetical *reversal* of it. To “notice” that for the most part I settle for probability is not enough. I must take specific steps to “keep this carefully in mind,” and to do so “for a time”—that is, for as long as it takes for the mind to retrain itself so that it settles for nothing less than certainty.

In Descartes’ eyes, then, to actually make this special effort, to first admit that my own thinking tends to be repeatedly undermined by old mental habits and then vow to resolutely formulate and follow a strategy of “pretence” for its self-correction—none of this is a mere matter of personal and psychological detail, something out of place in a truly rigorous epistemology. Later readers criticize Descartes for failing to make “a proper distinction” between psychology and logic.<sup>19</sup> For Descartes the meditator, however, there are good reasons for not making this distinction in the first place.<sup>20</sup>

Consider, for example, his treatment of method in the *Meditations*. Descartes does not start with a detailed, preliminary discussion of his procedure. Indeed, in the *Discourse*, he even warns that in analogy with a poorly run state, just as “a multiplicity of laws often provides an excuse for vices,” so it might be if we started the *Meditations* with “the large number of rules that make up logic” (AT VI, 19). Of course, to contemporary ears this can make it seem all the more imperative that *we* shore up such a skeletal and unsophisticated epistemic approach, in order properly to “evaluate” what he says.<sup>21</sup> So we try to appeal, for example, to the *Rules* and the *Discourse* to satisfy our own sense of priority, our sense that cognitive success means closely following the right method.<sup>22</sup> However, a careful reading shows that the *Rules* and the *Discourse* do not really offer pre-established methodological guides for the *Meditations*. Rather, they contain something more like “synthetically” useful abstractions *from* the meditative process. In this process itself, general methodological remarks are infrequent; and even when Descartes makes them, they are immediately fleshed out by accompanying reports of *what it takes to set aside* a common opinion, *really adopt* a rule, *actually search* for certainty, and so on. In this respect, Descartes still seems more ancient and dialogical than modern and formally logical.<sup>23</sup> On his map of the philosophical terrain, *knowing* and *knowing that I know* have not yet been split off into an anonymous system of rules on the one hand and the mere social-psychological fact of my using them on the other. Descartes’ self-monitoring way of thinking involves, as we might say now, some phenomenological elaboration of *what it is like* to think and to “be” a knower.



What is one to make, then, of this display of methodological informality by the author of the *Discourse on Method*? As more and more commentators have recently come to emphasize, the attitude is actually pervasive. It is in evidence not only in Meditation One, in Descartes' preparatory struggle against the influence of sense experience. It continues later, after initial doubts begin to be dispelled. Regarding certainty, for instance, critics have long complained that Descartes seems to alter his notion to suit the occasion—at first making it relatively narrow and demanding for the sake of Meditation One's allegedly "skeptical" purposes, but then turning it into something looser and more forgiving when he later wants to justify his metaphysical claims about substance. But this criticism is really the complaint of a spectator—that is, the complaint of a non-meditating mind, demanding from Descartes an initial rehearsal of the relevant "criteria of justification" of the sort that one might expect from a contemporary analytic colleague.

To "think with" Descartes is not to discover a *shift* from one, initial, explicit, and rigorous rule of certainty to another, later, more generous rule. Rather, it is to witness the *transformation in Descartes' vital understanding* of how his Rule of Certainty works under changing conditions. Thus, at first, it constitutes an obvious, negative test for "indubitability," but as he begins to measure the various ways in which ideas can be doubtful, it gradually turns for him into a instrument of superior probative power that one comes to understand in this more positive way precisely by employing the preliminary, negative test. As the *Discourse* reports and the opening lines of the *Meditations* affirm, initially all that seems obvious is that whatever else certainty might be, it must at least involve the rejection of any belief that can be *doubted*. But Descartes refrains from generalizing positively about Rule One until the beginning of Meditation Three, because only then is he in a position to extrapolate from Meditation Two's discovery of what it is like to actually have a certainty. First, he comes to learn how even hyperbolic doubt cannot dislodge the insight that he must *be* a thinker while in the *act* of thinking. This, in turn, opens up the possibility of discovering something of the mind's essential nature. Only then, in light of the clear and distinct perceptions already gained—and not by prior analysis of what Rule One in some "essential" way must always "mean"—is he finally ready to look back from the perspective of two completed episodes of meditation and speak of certainty "in general." Given my discoveries in Meditation Two, he says,

I will cast around more carefully to see whether there may be other things within me which I have not yet noticed. I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? . . . So I *now* seem to be able to lay it down as a *general rule* that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (AT VII, 35, my emphasis)



Descartes' understanding of his method is therefore just as cumulative as his understanding of the nature of the three substances he considers by means of it.

How very misleading and anachronistic it is, then, to start an exposition of the *Meditations* with a rehearsal of the methodological generalizations Descartes makes in other places. If he does not begin with such generalizations, it is not because he is epistemically sloppy or devious but because such an account would be inappropriate. In an “analytical”—as contrasted with a “synthetic”—chain of reflection, his understanding of the rules of method is in just as “preliminary” a condition as is his sense of what will be discovered through their use. Understanding what it means to follow the rules gets continually enriched as he employs them and benefits from this. “Meditation” involves thinking this exploratory process through from the inside, and seeing precisely when and how the enrichment of the rules happens is an essential part of the meditative process. Descartes is providing an account of *becoming knowledgeable*—of “coming to understand,” of “making my own,” what is there to be had. Of course, if one insists instead on finding and reconstructing a Cartesian “pure theory of inquiry,” one may have the pleasure of making Descartes look incautious and old-fashioned. But the pleasure is unearned. It comes from being more interested in reinforcing current vanities about our own supposedly superior epistemic habits than in actually listening to Descartes.

Small wonder, then, that Descartes finds “synthetic” or syllogistic reasoning so unsuitable for his *Meditations*. Such reasoning, he says, actually perverts the learning process and hypnotizes the mind by making it appear that there are

certain forms of reasoning in which the conclusions follow with such irresistible necessity that if our reason relies on them, even though it takes, as it were, a rest from considering a particular inference clearly and attentively, it can still draw a conclusion which is certain simply in virtue of the form.<sup>24</sup>

For Descartes, letting the mind “rest” or go on holiday this way, so that it merely follows the structure of an argument, is the very opposite of actually learning something—and thus of actually coming to understand what it is to philosophize. He does not mean, of course, that no truths are demonstrable, or that we must be reflecting on our thinking at every moment. But he is concerned with “investigating” the truth, not just “explain[ing] to others, arguments already known.” His point is that no one “has” the truth about figure, number, or nature “in virtue of the form” of his or her reasoning about them. Even the most skilled thinkers cannot formulate a valid syllogism with a true conclusion unless they have already recognized what it is to *gain an understanding* of the very truth (together with its grounds and their conditions) whose deduction such thinkers can only then formally



“display.” Indeed, Descartes concludes, since no actual understanding of truth ever comes from studying the rules of demonstration, formal logic might best be “transferred from philosophy to rhetoric.”<sup>25</sup>

## MEDITATION AND CO-MEDITATION

Let us refuse, then, to read Descartes as if he were a contemporary analytic colleague doing epistemology—or indeed resist any interpretation that separates his method from his style.<sup>26</sup> The *Meditations*’ apparently impure and first-person format is emphatically not a sign that Descartes’ inquiries fail in some unfortunate degree to keep the important issue of right reason distinct from the merely psychological.<sup>27</sup> Descartes is concerned with learning *what it is like* to demand, obtain, and possess certainty in thinking—and to do so against the background of a widely shared set of received opinions and practices that rest in the mostly unacknowledged attitude of sensual/wakeful common sense. He expects from his readers no less than what he requires of himself—namely, to join him in meditating on this state of affairs:

I wrote ‘Meditations,’ rather than ‘Disputations,’ as the [scholastic] philosophers have done, or “Theorems and Problems,” as the geometers would have done. . . . [because] I wanted to make it clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone . . . not willing to join me in meditating . . . [Besides, the disputational strategy of] bracing oneself to attack the truth makes one less suited to perceive it.’ (Second Set of Replies, AT VII, 157)<sup>28</sup>

Commentators still often persist, however, in fending off this first-person register, eager to proceed more directly to the analysis of Descartes’ “arguments.” Recently, for example, Broughton has discussed in detail “who” the meditator in the *Meditations* is, yet for all the historical material she marshals for the purpose, she frames the issue entirely in currently favored epistemic terms. What “beliefs” might one be expected to start with, and what “reasons” might one offer to reject, modify, or affirm them?<sup>29</sup> The penchant for seeing only Descartes the arguer and never Descartes the meditator bears a striking resemblance to another set of English-language commentators who see Socrates the same way. In relation to Descartes, Bernard Williams is perhaps the poster child for this practice. For he actually asserts that we should recognize the *Meditations*’ first-person mode of presentation for what it “really” is—namely, just the temporary function of Descartes’ being an epistemological pioneer. Williams then explains the matter away with the observation that today we can say that “the question of how many, other than [Descartes] himself, might be capable of fundamental scientific and philosophical discoveries [is] not very important *if none remain to be made* [sic].” This conclusion releases Williams to devote the rest of his book



to telling us, in self-confident retrospect, what remains “importantly true” about Descartes’ program and arguments.<sup>30</sup>

Wilson, too, separates of Descartes’ expository style from his substantive system. She grants that his system does “in some sense presuppose the availability of the concept of subject or self,” and she guesses that maybe the style is “intended to promote *identification* on the part of the reader.” But to her, “identification” is a merely psychological matter, so she insists that *our* focus should be on the only other presumed option—namely, the *Meditations* “as the presentation of a . . . *position* having some claim to general relevance, and not as history or autobiography.”<sup>31</sup> This advice, however, runs two issues together. It is one thing to notice that Descartes never explicitly “defines” his “position” in relation to his predecessors. It is quite another to ask, as I am asking here, whether *any* position ostensibly taken at some point in the *Meditations* ever achieves a condition so “resolutely” separated from its origins that it can entirely *be* what a well-formed “definition” might make of it. However little praise Descartes may have for philosophy’s history, as a meditator he has to repeatedly admit that he never achieves an ahistorical position—that is, one that leaps free of its initial conditions and becomes, in Williams’ absolutist language, “pure.”<sup>32</sup>

When offering such depersonalized and systematic interpretations of Descartes is held against them, Anglo-American commentators cry foul. They respond that it is no manhandling of sources to demand that we finally get down to the business of determining a philosopher’s *position*. We’re being given, as Wilson likes to say, a “bum rap.” What her response ignores, however, is precisely where the anachronism lies. Interpretations that turn Descartes’ own supposedly impure descriptions into ingredients in a general “position” in terms of which he supposedly would have to be issuing testable “claims” are interpretations that rely on and silently reaffirm precisely the positivists’ forced option between doing real philosophy by focusing on systems and arguments and merely doing history, sociology, and biography. But Descartes the meditator does not assume that the only alternative to historical study is pure, third-person construction of systems and arguments. Instead there is, as he sees it, *co-meditation*—that is, a thinking initiated by our own “resolute” decision to experience the intuitive force of each of the discoveries Descartes claims to make until we, too, apprehend it—or equally (it should be stressed), insist that we cannot. This is what, as he calls it, retraining the mind finally requires.

Adoption of this co-meditative resolve, says Descartes, is essential to understanding how my inquiry actually works. Without it, we remain as remote from Descartes’ meditative practice as does another set of commentators from Socratic dialogue. If we simply confront from outside the *Meditations* an imperfectly formed Cartesian system of rules and arguments and doctrines, we gain an anachronistically generated feeling that we are justified in criticizing that system using whatever techniques of evaluation “one” uses today to test someone else’s “claims.” Dicker, for example, puzzles



over Descartes' decision in the First Meditation to "withhold belief from things that are not entirely certain," and he concludes that by "withhold belief," Descartes *must* mean (because *we* mean) "suspend judgment." After all, he says confidently, there are only three *logically possible* "belief-postures" or (in Keith Lehrer's phrase) "doxastic attitudes" toward "statements"—namely, acceptance, rejection, or suspension. Therefore, Descartes *must* mean by "withholding belief" that he neither accepts nor rejects some statement.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Dicker succeeds in remaining detached from the meditative process, maintaining the usual analytic perspective, bringing the familiar machinery of twentieth-century epistemology into play—and thus precisely missing Descartes' point. Suspension of judgment may be the only *logical* alternative to the acceptance and rejection of *statements*, but considering logical alternatives about statements is certainly not the only way I can take the measure of my own thinking. And clearly, it is not Descartes' measure. As he quickly sees in Meditation One, his problem is not that he has this or that doubtful sense-based *belief* or that he is inclined to make this or that doubtful *claim*. What he sees is the whole general way in which he is initially *disposed to think*—namely, to live confidently in light of the assumption that "whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from . . . or through the senses."<sup>34</sup> Dicker does not acknowledge that he is already disposed to think *in a certain way*, too—in his case, an objectivistic way—or that Descartes thinks the first task for his "meditation" is making this sort of global and trusting sense of things itself the issue.

Descartes asks, how can I *transform* this ordinary sense-preferring orientation in terms of which I am already living into something like the objective, analytical stance that Dicker and Lehrer take for granted when they start classifying "doxastic attitudes" and analyzing particular statements? Descartes wants to know precisely how to achieve and to privilege this stance, because he realizes early on that this latter stance is neither natural to us nor capable of complete realization. To follow out this concern, he needs to do something quite different from employing the three comfortable concepts of true, false, and still-to-be-determined—as if he were already a detached logical Mind, confronting an especially stubborn "belief" or "statement." Indeed, in this regard, one imagines that Descartes would have felt greater kinship with Simone de Beauvoir than with Wilson, Williams, or Dicker. Beauvoir responds to the conclusion of Meditation One (and above all, to its methodological separation of mind from body) and to the first metaphysical question in Meditation Two (Am I a *man*?) with the rejoinder that as a woman she could not continue meditating under such conditions. No doubt Descartes would have found the idea strange—that one's gendered embodiment might interfere with one's resolve to think objectively. But as an objection that obviously arises from an aspiring co-meditator's initially experienced condition, he would see that in principle, Beauvoir's reaction is the sort we need to take seriously.<sup>35</sup>



In short, this meditator who seeks co-meditators never turns out to actually *be* the ideal Objective Thinker, Pure Inquirer, or Logical Mind who haunts our inheritance of him. The *Meditations* report no moment of supreme clarity when the Rules achieve their ultimate (re)construction—no final methodological step by which an actual meditator might become their flawlessly competent instrument. The essential phenomenon in Descartes' inquiry is the continuous struggle of someone who aspires to live up to this ideal, someone forever prompting himself to issue reminders of why and how one never instantiates Reason Itself. Today, such personalization of epistemic inquiry can seem hopelessly subjective and autobiographical. After all, if every cogito must follow the same rules to obtain truth and avoid falsity (so goes this line of argument), then obviously it is analysis of these rules that matters—not the historical and psycho-biographical story of their acquisition and use. What can be so wrong about depersonalizing epistemology in this way? Doesn't Descartes simply fail to distinguish properly between issues of evidence and justification and issues of individual and historical discovery?<sup>36</sup> Let us note that questions like this do not reflect merely internal quarrels about the nature, structure, and contextualization of method. Rather, they take us again to the problem of anachronism we saw earlier in connection with Socrates' dialogues. For they manifest the unspoken hegemony of late-modern and contemporary assumptions about what it means to raise reflective questions about how to think, what to expect when doing so, and whether these expectations are fully realizable. The texts show, however, that Descartes the meditator is no party to this sort of “purely” epistemic debate.

## DESCARTES' PROTO-CARTESIANISM

To be fair, however, we must admit that Descartes' writings are full of “Cartesian” imagery that can be used to discourage my un-Cartesian reading of him. After all, a “thinking thing” has no personality, body, gender, or emotional life, and ultimately also, no culture or history. The Descartes who fashions the cogito in this way can certainly seem to be assuming that the standpointless orientation we know as Cartesian is possible. Moreover, we know that Descartes is no friend of history. Studying the tradition, he says, is like traveling. It can broaden mental horizons and combat provincialism, but “one who spends too much time traveling becomes a stranger in one's own country” and thus “remains ignorant” of its practices.<sup>37</sup> So, for the genuine thinker who returns home and employs the four rules, history (like biography, psychology, and sociology) is ultimately a distraction. Those who really care about the principles of sound reason have little use for the way other people, at other times or places, may happen to have thought.

In retrospect, Descartes' travel simile seems prophetic. In later empiricist and positivist epistemologies, not just the personal and psychological history



of individuals, but tradition generally is increasingly regarded as irrelevant to philosophical inquiry. Actual minds (so goes the reasoning) may continue to be shaped and bewitched by received opinion, but the criteria that constitute the test of opinion are themselves quite independent of such contingencies. Just as the Cartesian imperative seems to dictate, both the *topic* of epistemic analysis and the *standpoint* from which this topic is analyzed are increasingly depicted as independent of social and historical forces. Besides, why label us anachronistic for refusing Descartes' call for co-meditation, when we already know that the so-called "discoveries" he asks us to experience are all out of date? Who today can seriously hope to achieve Descartes' alleged "insights" concerning Mind, God, and Nature? And now that his method, too, seems have become a merely surpassable legacy, what possible motivation can be left for taking the idea of co-meditation seriously?<sup>38</sup>

The trouble with writing Descartes' epitaph in this way is not only that it ignores what Descartes reports that he himself is actually doing and reflects an implicit (and question-begging) assumption that *our* judgments about Descartes originate from an unproblematic standpoint. It is not, of course, that contemporary critics actually announce, "I'm starting from a philosophically unproblematic standpoint." It is, rather, that many contemporaries who would never say this nonetheless *act* as if they were so resolute about their orientation that even dealing with predecessors at all is entirely optional.

In Chapter 1 I argued that even Rorty, who is certainly more critical about this presumption than most, still follows the mainstream majority when he insists that today's philosophers should be free "to seek out their own intellectual ancestors . . . or [even] claim to have no ancestors at all."<sup>39</sup> It follows, he argues, that we must simply be "tolerant" about whether historical scholarship figures in someone's "chosen approach." Wilson agrees, noting that although some philosophers do develop positions "in conscious relation" to their predecessors, others—quite reasonably—do not.<sup>40</sup> To many analytic philosophers, these democratic-sounding gestures by Rorty and Wilson may seem self-evidently progressive. Doesn't the spirit of pluralism dictate precisely their approach? Shouldn't we just acknowledge that some of us do and others do not "choose" to bring themselves into a "conscious relation" with, say, Descartes? The answer should be an emphatic no. Wilson and Rorty, like many others, seem to think that they have earned the right to treat these questions rhetorically, because they have spoken in opposition to positivism, and because they are willing to say that studying the history of philosophy has value and that sometimes it is even acceptable to have a "conscious relation" to it. But in this, they are thoroughly mistaken, and in making this assumption they betray the unacknowledged historical determinateness of their own (still essentially positivist) orientation. One does not escape the residual influence of positivism's hostility toward tradition by calling for tolerance about whether someone makes *conscious use* of intellectual ancestors and historical writing. Such calls for tolerance only



reinforce the positivist view that we *can* leave the past behind—that our relationship to tradition *is* a matter of choice.

Yet there is something older and deeper here than just an unconscious recapitulation of the strictures of positivism—something, ultimately, very Cartesian. Recall Descartes' advice in Meditation Four concerning error. We must distinguish, he says, between the understanding and the will. We avoid error by first simply “entertaining” an idea to see if it is clear or clarifiable, and only then “affirming” it. Without question, this is good Cartesian advice for the perfectly self-possessed mind—that is, a mind which imagines itself entirely stripped of its pre-meditative past and wholly guided by the four methodological rules. For such a mind, error would indeed always in principle be avoidable—if only the will restrains itself from “affirming” ideas—that is, making judgments—until the pure understanding determines that it is in the presence of clear and distinct ones. This ideal is inscribed in the very imagery of a self-possessed mind and of the four rules that would guide it, as these are characterized in the *Meditations*.<sup>41</sup> It is the ideal toward which every move in the *Meditations* and every article in the *Principles* seems to be directed. It is obviously also the template for the Enlightenment ideal that dominates the modern legacy. It does not, however, accurately characterize Descartes' own philosophical practice. It does not reflect what he says he is actually doing, as opposed to what the rules imply about the sort of thing a perfectly self-controlled cogito would necessarily do.

When Descartes tells us how matters are actually going for him in practice—that is, when he speaks reflectively about what we might call *the immediately operative vital understanding of his own meditative process*—he never speaks as a pure inquirer. He fills his account with little reminders of just how far short his actual reflections repeatedly fall from this ideal—little confessions, for example, that old habits are never entirely extinguished; that “the religion of my nurse” survives pledges to put faith aside; that clarity fades whenever attention weakens; that one can have “some understanding” but never full “comprehension” of God; that nature in its full concreteness is too rich with possibilities for reason alone ever to know it; and that adventitious ideas turn out to be “generally” reliable even if we ought not trust them on the occasion of any single experience.<sup>42</sup>

Such humbling disclaimers, moreover, do not appear only in the *Meditations*. Recall, for example, the limits placed on the application of the RULES in the *Discourse*. Far from claiming his method will cover all reasoning for all occasions and for all time, Descartes specifically exempts politics, theology, and ethics as topics to be methodologically scrutinized. Rather, in order to “live as happily as I could” while pursuing my meditative task, he says, I provided myself with four provisional moral maxims and “*set them aside* together with the truths of faith . . . [so that] I could freely undertake to rid myself of *all the rest* of my opinions.”<sup>43</sup> “All the rest” of my opinions, he says. This means *not* including his opinions on extra-scientific matters. Of course, Descartes' readers mostly ignored this qualification, turning instead



to the task of refining his programmatic remarks about the need for methodological uniformity among all the sciences, and then ultimately widening this idea out in the direction of a universal, topic-neutral, “monological” logic that tests not only our knowledge of number, figure, and nature, but everything thinkable. Especially in the empiricist-positivist tradition, not only “the rest” of our opinions but also our thoughts on politics, faith, and morals are ultimately brought within the scope of this logic—though frequently just long enough for some of them to be declared deficient or “noncognitive.” In this way, Descartes’ original meditative practice disappears into a Cartesian “system”—a “position” that the *Meditations* themselves seem only partially and imperfectly to have anticipated, and that is expressed in terms of an epistemology that only partially and imperfectly defines the criteria of rationality that might justify the search for such a system. Both the perfected Cartesian epistemology and the completed Cartesian system came to be depicted and contested in numerous ways, as has the possibility of their realization. And even today, the very suggestion that both Pure Inquiry and a System of Nature are false idols leads everywhere to a seeming forced option of either “postmodern” satisfaction or hand-ringing worries about the dangers of constructivism, or relativism, or worse.

Descartes, however, never imagines this sort of totalizing extension of either his method or his physics. Rather, the course of meditation traces the image of a thinking that is finite, forever beset by problems of intellectual inheritance and habit, and incapable of wholly transcending its roots even when it limits itself to considering number, figure, or nature. In addition, Descartes specifically warns us that there are extra-scientific activities that require faith, and that moral “maxims” must have a more worldly and sensible character. From the perspective of these initially bracketed activities, “mathematicized” thinking is always too abstract and derivative. (For example, the second moral maxim notes that demanding certainty in practical affairs would effectively dictate inaction.) For all Descartes’ willingness to depict scientific thinking in idealized terms, there is no mood in which he imagines that *all* thinking, on *whatever* topic, might proceed from a contextless Nowhere, with concern for one’s historical, social, and cultural inheritance suppressed or made “optional,” and with anything less than certainty deemed epistemically secondary or even “non-cognitive.”

Is this just another case of someone telling us, Do As I Say, Not As I Do? Should we try to reconcile the meditating Descartes and the Cartesian thinker (a move that today is often called naturalizing epistemology)? Or should we perhaps just reverse traditional practice and privilege the former over the latter—as Kierkegaard does by making the subjective “I am” take precedence the objective “I think”?<sup>44</sup> I recommend that we do neither. On the contrary, I urge that we construe the *Meditations*’ failure to present us with a single consistent picture of what meditation can accomplish as a *necessary* failure.<sup>45</sup> In this way, we can see clearly how contingent and context-bound—how very “somewhere”—the idea of philosophizing from



Nowhere really is. On the one hand, there is Descartes' general, programmatic template—his idealized picture of successful meditation that continues to structure objectivist philosophy right down to the logical empiricists and their progeny. On the other hand, there are the *Meditations*' frequent "reports from within," which tell us what to expect from actual meditation. This meditation depicts the efforts of a real inquirer, focused on an ever-recurrent tendency to fall away from strict adherence to the proper rules of inquiry, and ultimately unimpressed by merely abstract and external reconstructions of the perfect picture of what it will be like when we get it right. Unlike Socrates, Descartes did actually write a *Discourse on Method*, but its quick and dirty discussion of the "sort of thing" a mathematicizing mind should do is hardly a handbook of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* . . . which he never finished.

In short, Cartesian interpretations of the *Meditations* decontextualize and thereby distort Descartes' meditation in three ways. First, by constructing a logic of pure inquiry that ignores his narrative of the actual inquiry process, such interpretations produce a falsely idealized, ahistorical, one-size-fits-all model of scientific understanding. Second, they totalize this ideal model by ignoring Descartes' explicit identification of extra-scientific matters that must be left aside. The first distortion creates the myth of Knowing from Nowhere; the second glorifies scientism. However, the third and still least-questioned sort of decontextualization corrupts, not just the idea of knowledge or of scientific practice, but the idea of the philosophical analysis of knowledge and scientific practice—by implying that it can be conducted in just as ahistorical a manner and with just as much insensitivity to extra-scientific matters as the mythologized inquiry process itself.<sup>46</sup> What a close reading of Descartes' writings shows, however, is that the meditator who actually reflects on thinking in the *Meditations* remains too modest, too worldly, and too phenomenological to succumb to any of these three decontextualizing tendencies.

## CONCLUSION: DESCARTES AS ALREADY TOO CARTESIAN

Yet in the end, we also understand that Descartes could never have embraced this portrait of finite human consciousness and historically determinate rationality that peeks out at us from within his own meditative practice. Confronted with such an image, he would have rejected it both as a characterization of knowledge practice and of philosophical reflection on this practice. Had he been able to accept this portrait, neither his practice nor his way of reflecting on this practice could have been so readily purified and formalized by his readers. Thanks to the excesses of the intervening Cartesian era, however, we may now be ready to recover and reconsider Descartes' own pre-Cartesian practice.



How might such a recovery proceed? At a minimum, it would require that we learn to interrogate his meditative process according to the question: Where is Descartes standing—or better, how is he situated (*befindet sich*); how does he find himself there, in the midst of things—when he speaks as a finite thinker who makes idealizing epistemic pronouncements? This is not merely to make the point that Descartes' meditation can never be adequately understood apart from its style, its intended audience, and the historical and linguistic contingencies of its time and place.<sup>47</sup> Rather, I am making the same point with respect to Descartes in the *Meditations* that I made earlier about Socrates in Plato's early dialogues. Of course, accounts of these works that keep the empirical contingencies in mind are preferable to presentist readings that find Socrates or Descartes "interesting" only where they seem to be like contemporary colleagues. Yet I am not concerned primarily with either with historical fairness or the hermeneutical observation that Socrates' or Descartes' own thinking, like anyone's thinking, is existentially determinate and fraught with tensions.

What I want most to stress here is our own *inheritance* of their thinking. At the beginning of his lecture on Descartes, Hegel remarks that "here . . . like the sailor after a long voyage, we can at last shout, 'Land ho.' Descartes made a fresh start in every respect." For Hegel this means that with Descartes the time of truly modern reasoning begins, and the principle of his new era is "the thinking that proceeds from itself."<sup>48</sup> "A completely fresh start that involves a "thinking that proceeds from itself" is a pretty good description of what it would be like to philosophize from Nowhere, and this may indeed be the motto of a good Cartesian. It is not, however, a good description of Descartes. Just as I argued earlier that recent commentary on Socrates tends to impose an epistemic grid over his dialogical practice, so I argue here with respect to Descartes' meditation. To the extent that we understand Descartes' own failure to *be* a Cartesian, I think we can reinforce the conclusions of the previous chapter—and thus and shed further light, for our own benefit, on the impossibility of ever really *being* a thinker from Nowhere. Descartes himself, of course, is already taking his philosophical bearings from formalist rules and an objectivist ideal. Hence, he is only able to handle his experiences of limitation sideways and in passing, through reluctant confessions about his forever impure and unformal practice. What might we do differently? How might we learn to recognize squarely, in our own orientation, those features of finitude and historical determinateness in thinking that are *on display* in the actually meditating Descartes?

As I mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty offers some guidance for this sort of genealogical recovery. He suggests that we start by "endow[ing] finitude with a positive significance [thus taking] seriously the strange phrase in the Fourth Meditation that makes me 'a middle term' [*tertium quid*] between God and nothingness." Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain that in such an interpretation, we would have to consider two fundamental



points that Descartes himself could never acknowledge straight on. First, we would have to “accept human thought in its factual reality as a guarantee of itself.” Instead of hyperbolically transcending ordinary beliefs in the direction of something allegedly more certain, we would have to phenomenologically relocate ordinary believing, by placing it back inside the experience of human embodiment, where it is already understood that to *be* embodied involves a relation between our thinking and the world “as such” that is a living fact which can never become a skeptical problem. From this phenomenological angle, attempting to ground the certainty of my existence in a pure “I think” gets things backward. For if it were true that we were, or were at least capable of actually becoming absolutely self-possessed Minds, then error and illusion would, at least in our “resolute” moments, be impossible.<sup>49</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s second point is, so to speak, the inverse of the first one. We would also have to understand, he says, that “the connection between essence and existence is not found in experience, but in [the] . . . idea of the infinite.” His language here is somewhat misleading. He does not mean we should join the Cartesians in actually searching beyond experience for an idea of the infinite with which to connect essence and existence. His point, on the contrary, is a negative one. If we look to Descartes’ practice, not to his programmatic self-descriptions, we see that there is no disembodied place from which Reason might generate either the requisite idea of a unifying infinite, or the twin notions of essence and existence that would need to be connected by a unifying idea. The famous “problems” we all learned about as undergraduates—namely, of the reality of the external world, of the union of soul and body, and of the existence of other minds—only become problems in the first place if one (i) assumes that there is such a disembodied condition and that thinking must “proceed from it,” and then (ii) recoils in alarm at how far short ordinary life falls from this condition and thus how helpless we are in the face of these “problems.” Issues such as how to conceive the union of minds and bodies, says the real and very un-Cartesian Descartes, are not something to be solved by the intellect and its “metaphysical thoughts”; they are things taught to us in “the ordinary course of life and conversation.”<sup>50</sup>

In a word, the thinking that takes place *in* the *Meditations* is finite and contextualized; it begins and remains in the midst of things. However, the reflective voice that tells us *about* this thinking is not so situated. It is animated by Descartes’ Cartesian ideal of a Thinker that never fails to follow The Rules. This ideal encourages Descartes to underplay the actual conditions of his thinking and misperceive “resoluteness,” so that he imagines that thinking succeeds to the extent that it exercises power to disengage from our situated practices and be a Mental Thing.

The tension between this Cartesian self-image and Descartes’ own non-Cartesian practice should seem very familiar. When, for example, we try



to “figure out” (from where?) how we could be both (or either or neither) minds and bodies, we must simultaneously suppress our experience of already *being* embodied thinkers and yet also take precisely that same experience silently for granted in order to motivate the “problem” of what “mind” and “body” might “really” be and how, when rigorously reconceived, we might still “justify” saying they are related. As Taylor warns us, however, we should not react to our disillusionment with all the machinery of “epistemology with a capital E” by trying to *choose* (from where?) some kind of replacement for the Cartesian account. For in that case, we simply fall back into the same old ahistorical imagery of making context-free choices in favor of context-free philosophical options that led to the concoction of Epistemology in the first place.

We might, however, ponder Descartes’ failure to become a Cartesian instead. Merleau-Ponty’s unearthing of “phenomenological” elements in Descartes’ writings suggests a way to “rediscover the perceptual world” such that all the topics on which Descartes wishes us to reflect are seen as they “are” in actual life, not as they might be Epistemologically—and then abstractly and falsely—redefined:

True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it. I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest. (*PoP*, 452)

Cartesianism misunderstands the nature of this “true” philosophical reflection by suppressing “where I am.” It fosters the belief that we might actually come to think about the things that concern us as if we were not concerned with them. Yet even the “general refusal to be anything at all” that the *Meditations* prescribes as a cure for uncertainty can do no more than what Descartes tells us it can do in the *Discourse*—namely, turn us away from some concerns (e.g., faith, morality, art) for the sake of others (e.g., mathematical and empirical science).<sup>51</sup> We remain “between God and nothingness”—that is, in the midst of things. No matter how Cartesian a mind tries to be, it cannot make this fact go away. Rather, as Heidegger says, it takes the experience of being in the midst of things with it, even as it shapes and delimits what it is willing to say about this experience. In retrospect, it is Descartes’ descriptions of the course of his own thinking in the *Meditations* that can remind us that it is the hegemony of his pure-minded, egological portrait of thinking, not whether one has learned to say post-Cartesian things, that remains the real problem. After Descartes there were, unfortunately, many Cartesians to come—convinced more by the overtly objectivistic aims of Descartes’ project than by his imperfect practice—who imagined that they were thinking and acting as if being embodied,



encultured, and historical were just an option they could decide not pick.<sup>52</sup> It is after them, and not immediately after a phenomenologically retrievable Descartes, that we ourselves must start.

## NOTES

1. I am certainly not the first one to find an un-Cartesian philosopher in the *Meditations*—though I am perhaps radicalizing the point in a way others have not. See, e.g., Gary Hatfield, “Epistemology and Science in the Image of Modern Philosophy: Rorty on Descartes and Locke,” in *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth Century Philosophy*, ed. Juliet Floyd and Sanford Shieh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 303–413.
2. *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch[arles] Adam and P[aul] Tannery, new rev. ed., 11 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–76), vol. VI, *Discourse*, 77. Translations are from John Cottingham et al., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), which includes the AT pagination.
3. Williams, PPE, 66, my emphasis. I focus here on the Anglo-American version of this project, but I could just as well have cited, say, Husserl’s *Krisis*, sect. 15. Moreover, the idea that the *Meditations* is written from and promotes a standpoint from which the mind is the “absolute possessor of all [its] thoughts” informs much of the French tradition of commentary as well—as, e.g., Merleau-Ponty remarks at one point, referring specifically to Martial Gueroult, *Descartes Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, 2 vols., trans. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) in “Course Notes,” *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 14.
4. Again, regarding the Continental strain of contemporary thought, a good case can be made that notwithstanding Husserl’s willingness to recognize “different kinds of intuition,” the general contours of his “unbiased” transcendental phenomenological standpoint are as Cartesian as logical empiricism’s “rationally reconstructionist” orientation. See, e.g., Jan Patočka, “Cartesianism and Phenomenology,” in *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 285–325. The right question to ask is, where is Husserl standing—Heidegger would say “who” is he?—when he formulates a “transcendental phenomenological” analysis? Husserl’s first generation of readers—who were also reading Dilthey, Kierkegaard, Bergson, and Nietzsche—thought this a very telling question indeed.
5. Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and Structure of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 3–8, at 5 and 8.
6. PPE, 65–8, 302–3. For sympathetic exegesis and a defense of Williams’ conception, see A. W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
7. PPE, 211–12, 245–9, 302–3. See also *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 135–9.
8. Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), xi. In the chapter “Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World” (80–107), Putnam argues that Williams’ insistence upon the “absolute” character of (ideal) scientific knowledge, taken together with his corollary of the necessarily “non-objective” character of ethics, shows the untenability of the whole philosophical enterprise as Williams understands it. For “if everything that is not physics is ‘perspectival,’ then the notion of



- the ‘absolute’ is itself hopelessly perspectival” (107). See also Putnam’s *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 122–9; and *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 167–78. For Williams’ replies, see “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,” *Philosophy*, 75 (2000): 477–95 (reprinted in Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006], 180–99).
9. See Merleau-Ponty, PoP, 46. We would thus “take seriously that strange phrase in the *Fourth Meditation* that turns me into ‘something intermediate [*medium quid*] between God and nothingness.’ ” The phrase appears in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, AT, VII, 54.
  10. One of my favorite examples of this condescension is in A. J. Ayer. After fifty pages of unrelieved tradition bashing, he assures us that things are not really as bad as they seem, because “the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily not metaphysicians but analysts” (*Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd ed. [New York: Dover, 1952], 52).
  11. Nevertheless, there is growing Anglo-American opposition to the practice of treating Descartes as if his *Meditations* were a somewhat less successful version of twentieth-century philosophy’s epistemic inquiries. See the pioneering study by L. J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes: A Study of the ‘Meditations’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); also, e.g., Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “The Structure of Descartes’ *Meditations*,” L. Aryeh Kosman, “The Naïve Narrator: Meditation in Descartes’ *Meditations*,” and Gary Hatfield, “The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The *Meditations* as Cognitive Exercises,” in EDM, 1–20, 21–43, and 45–79, respectively; Marjorie Grene, “Idea and Judgment in the Third Meditation: An Approach to the Reading of Cartesian Texts,” in her *Descartes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3–22; Emmet T. Flood, “Descartes’ Comedy of Error,” *MLN*, 102, no. 4 (1987): 847–66; Beryl Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), ch. 3; and Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the ‘Meditations’* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
  12. Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. vii.
  13. See, e.g., the editor’s Introductions in Brie Gertler, ed., *Privileged Access: Philosophical Accounts of Self-Knowledge* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003) and Quassim Cassam, ed., *Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1–18; and also Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 4–12; Owen J. Flanagan, Jr., *The Science of the Mind*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 66–7, 193–200; and William Lyons, *The Disappearance of Introspection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 1–22. The supposition that Descartes’ own method is “introspective” can be traced to standard readings of Locke (sc., his analysis of the “ideas of reflexion” in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975], II, i, 2–5, 24–5). But see contra, J. Douglas Rabb, *John Locke on Reflection: A Phenomenology Lost* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).
  14. *Meditations*, AT, VII, Second Set of Replies, 159, 155; also 9–10; also IX/1, 121. On Descartes’ analytic method, see E. M. Curley, “Analysis in the *Meditations*: The Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas.” EDM, 153–76. Recall that Kant’s first *Critique* proceeds analytically, and the *Prolegomena*, synthetically.
  15. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, AT, X, 403; also 367, my italics. Elsewhere, he considers what sort of person will have difficulty with his approach,



- humbly contrasts himself with better minds, and says, “My plan is to reform my own thoughts and construct them upon a foundation that is all my own” (*Discourse*, AT, VI, 15).
16. AT, VII, 22; cf. 47–8. Cf. his reply to Gassendi: “It is no help in correcting our errors to say that we make mistakes because our mind is in darkness or our nature is weak; this is just like saying that we make mistakes because we are prone to error” (AT, VII, 349).
  17. For a recent account of the *Meditations* that stresses that carefully retracing its order of reasons is supposed to have the effect of retraining the mind that is engaged in the process, see Hatfield, *Descartes and the ‘Meditations.’*
  18. Hence, it is misleading to call Descartes’ reasoning in the *Meditations* a “method of doubt,” even if one argues, as does Janet Broughton, that the certainty of a few fundamental truths must first be demonstrated in order for the method to work (*Descartes’ Method of Doubt* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 98–101). The problem is that one could utilize such a method *without* retraining the mind, making it simply a running corrective to our usual epistemological naïveté and intellectual generosity.
  19. Frankfurt’s still widely cited and recently re-issued *Dreamers, Demons, and Madmen* shows the way to do this by approving on the one hand the fact that Descartes’ *Meditations*, like Plato’s dialogues, “do not emasculate the philosophical enterprise by severing the connection with the lives of men”—and praising on the other hand Descartes’ refusal to “place his inquiry within a social context,” so as to avoid “betraying the anonymity of reason” (Harry G. Frankfurt, *Dreamers, Demons, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes’ ‘Meditations’* [1970; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007], 4). After Kant, epistemic efforts to avoid this “betrayal” of anonymity have typically shown rather little corresponding worry over “emasculatation”—let alone over the heavily gendered character of this idea.
  20. The question of Descartes’ “first-person viewpoint” is reconsidered by Gareth B. Matthews, who claims to avoid the forced option of merely personal thoughts versus thoughts that generalize by arguing that “reflexive” I questions (e.g., “How can I be certain that I exist?”) translate/generalize into reflexive “he,” “she,” or “one” questions that preserve the first-person viewpoint (*Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992], 3–6). Matthews’ interest, however, is primarily in Descartes’ *answers* to such questions and *their* generalization. Hence, the questions of self-reference and self-knowledge (i.e., questions of what can or cannot be generally known about the self from a first-person “perspective”) dominate Matthews’ discussions, and these issues are not carefully distinguished from the very different issue of what Descartes wants us to learn, as philosophers, about the *experience* of (impure) thinking. In Chapter 9, e.g., the fact that Descartes never raises the problem of other minds is treated at length, but Matthews is so intent on raising the problem in contemporary epistemological terms and using what Descartes says accordingly that he never asks why Descartes fails to raise the question in the first place. The answer lies in Descartes’ very different direction of concern—not what can I *justifiably assert* about this or that real external thing, but *what is it like to say anything under mathematically inspired rules?* Like mathematicians, whose relations to other mathematicians qua mathematicians are mediated by these rules, Cartesian thinkers “are” for each other only “as” other rule-users, not as really “other” minds, or immaterial somethings within natural bodies, or unperceivable entities, etc. Matthews reflects the empiricist-positivists’ much stronger tendency to turn this epistemologically articulated “being-with-other[-mind]s” into a metaphysical “problem.”



21. Michael Williams even argues that we contemporaries must be wary of this methodological silence; for it is precisely “Descartes’ artful method of exposition—which involves developing his doubts in a way that is initially rather vague”—that prevents us from realizing how unnatural and metaphysically loaded these doubts really are (“Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt,” EDM, 117–39, at 135). For the suggestion that Williams thereby sees more of himself in the *Meditations* than Descartes, see Broughton, *Descartes’ Method*, 74–8. It should not escape notice that English-language commentaries have long made the same sort of complaint as Williams’ about Socrates. He, too, gets criticized—and by some thus also suspected of being disingenuous—for not being more forthcoming about how his dialogues work.
22. In addition to the problem I stress here, there is also the widespread misperception that the *Rules* and the *Discourse* present the same picture of Descartes’ method. Among other differences, the *Rules* contains no discussion of the method of doubt. See, e.g., E.M. Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 21–45. For an informative analysis of the systematic and historical relationships between the *Rules*, the *Discourse*, and the *Meditations*, see the editor’s introduction to *Regulae ad directionem ingenii/Rules for the Direction of the Natural Intelligence*, ed. and trans. George Heffernan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 1–60.
23. As we will see, Comte also is opposed to the sort of methodological formalism that infects later empiricist-positivist thought. In *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), Laurence Lampert defends Descartes’ seemingly substantial, if mostly implicit, “emulation” of a Socratic model of inquiry, at least for the self-overcoming of ignorance (in the first half of the *Discourse*, as well as in the introductory letter to the French translation and Part I of the *Principles*). Lampert, however, is critically tracing the rise and development of modernism; hence he stresses all the evidence in Descartes’ writings that shows him “turning away” from Socrates (171–80). Thus in the end, Lampert argues, “flaunting wisdom rather than ignorance, [Descartes] broke with Socrates in order to begin his public life with a successful apology rather than a futile one” (180).
24. *Rules*, AT, X, 405–6; also *Meditations*, Second Set of Replies, AT, VII, 155–6. The best summary of this point is still L.J. Beck, *The Method of Descartes: A Study of the ‘Regulae’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 102–10; see also Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*, 26–32. Descartes’ proximate enemy here is, of course, the medieval “dialecticians,” but such criticism of syllogistic reasoning goes back to Sextus Empiricus.
25. *Rules*, AT, X, 406. Actually, Descartes makes a number of objections to syllogistic reasoning. John A. Passmore identifies four but discusses primarily the one I mention here in his neglected “Descartes, the British Empiricists, and Formal Logic,” *Philosophical Review*, 62 (1953): 546–50.
26. From the beginning, commentators have argued over the relation between the kind of meditation which leads to Augustine’s conclusion that, “I am mistaken, therefore I am,” and kind of Cartesian meditation that leads to Descartes’ proof of the *cogito*. Majority opinion has always been that since Augustine employs his conclusion in order to consider the relation between faith and reason and Descartes, entirely to establish the foundation of what can be known by reason, the similarity is obvious but superficial. Recently, however, Stephen Menn has revisited the whole issue and take a strongly revisionist position both on this question specifically and on the relation between Augustine and Descartes generally. He argues that what Descartes took from Augustine was not, fundamentally, a set of metaphysical theses,



but a *discipline* for approaching wisdom and therefore also the series of intellectual intuitions produced by this discipline. (*Descartes and Augustine* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 393). Menn traces this discipline back through Augustine to Plotinus' idea of contemplation and claims that in a modified form, it is "useful for Augustine, and indirectly for Descartes, because both Augustine and Descartes, in their quite different intellectual situations, are trying to escape the constraints of some ideology that they see as bound to the senses, and believe that they can attain wisdom only through an intellectual intuition purified of sensory traces" (394). In my view, Menn underestimates the degree to which Descartes felt the need to separate reasoning about nature from *any* theological opinions about nature and thus overestimates both what he supposes Descartes is willing to tolerate about Augustinian metaphysics and what Menn admits is only an "indirect" use of a supposedly Plotinian "tradition" of contemplation. However, the general issue falls outside the scope of this study. Here I only want to show that whatever Descartes' substantive opinions concerning our actual knowledge of nature, his attempt to work out an "analytical" method for achieving that knowledge fails in phenomenologically informative ways.

27. I ignore for now the much-debated and perfectly legitimate questions about whether Descartes' thought implies sexism (see n. 35) or intellectual elitism, and thus for whom he can rightly be said to speak. My point is simply that first-person-like as his account clearly is, it is simultaneously and just as clearly intersubjective in its intent. Hence, I agree with Jonathan Rée that, in contrast to the *Discourse*, Descartes' 'voice' in the *Meditations* is first-person more in the sense of a diarist than an autobiographer, for 'if autobiographies such as the *Discourse* temptingly invite readers to take part in the story by making their own appraisals of the narrator's retrospective self-appraisals, diaries are a positive and almost irresistible provocation to do so' (*Philosophical Tales* [London: Methuen, 1987], 23). Insofar, then, as Descartes has picked a form of writing that is virtually an "incitement to philosophical thought in its readers," he could not have made a more appropriate selection.
28. Here, as in Chapter 2, I invoke Gadamer's remark that Socrates experienced and Aristotle wrote down the observation that lovers of wisdom and clever sophists, judged strictly from the outside in terms of the "pure form" of their reasoning, often look just the same (*Metaphysics* 1004b, 22–26).
29. *Descartes' Method of Doubt*, 22–32, 78–93. In *Descartes' 'Meditations': An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Catherine Wilson begins with a "sharp distinction" (which, incredibly, she calls a "departure from past convention") between "the historical Descartes—the seventeenth-century intellectual combatant, friend and foe of numerous illustrious philosophers—and his solitary Meditator" (8), explaining that we should understand the latter as a sort of expository device—"a fictional character" who is taking "a voyage of intellectual (rather than geographical) discovery," thereby acting as a kind of stand-in for "everyone" who actually follows the Order of Reasons in order to learn what Descartes himself thinks he has already learned (6–7).
30. PPE, 30–1. Thus, Williams' book presents a lengthy exposition of the *Meditations* "from the perspective of the Pure Inquirer" whom he understands Descartes to be asking us to follow . . . but without ever becoming one himself.
31. *Descartes*, 4–5, my emphasis. In her later piece, she even enlists Descartes himself in seeing a forced option here and solving it in just her way—by identifying him as one of those figures who display "little or no concern with defining their positions in relation to the long history of philosophical thought" ("History of Philosophy," 208).



32. The other half of this issue is, of course, whether one would be right in saying that Descartes only inherits explicitly known “positions” from the past, or whether instead one has to look at the historicity of Descartes’ thinking as something that is much less in the inheritor’s self-conscious control. I come back to this issue shortly.
33. Georges Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 13–14. Dicker goes on to explain that Descartes’ taking such an attitude toward propositions insures that what he says is not just “idiosyncratic,” but that he “means to speak for all of us” (16). Is it true that the only way to avoid being idiosyncratic is to be abstractly logical?
34. AT, VII, 18. This, of course, turns out to be incorrect, according to later findings in the same Meditation. Yet all that this shows is that coming to clarity about how we think scientifically is a transformational process in which earlier “obvious” points upon further consideration need modification.
35. “Women and Creativity,” in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 28–9; cf. *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), xxi. On this construal Beauvoir’s relation to Descartes, as well as on the issue identified in n. 29, see above all Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 46–77.
36. The movement toward formalized interpretations of the *Meditations* is plainly indicated, e.g., in the fact that earlier moderns still tend to follow Descartes in making epistemic inquiry focus on an idealized *knower* (sc., its faculties, powers, and connection to an outer world), whereas later inquiries tend to consider instead the ideal *conditions for knowledge* (both logical and linguistic). This shift of focus is already defended in Mill’s profoundly influential *System of Logic* (*Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vols. 7–8 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973–4], e.g., 7:87, and R.F. McRae’s Introduction, 7:xxxix–xliv).
37. *Meditations*, AT, VI, 6. Also, *Rules*, AT, X, 367.
38. One must be mindful of this historical shift in the primary meaning of “Cartesianism,” or be tempted to settle too easily for the idea that Descartes has already been surpassed when no one adheres to his substantive teachings. For reactions up to the mid-eighteenth century see, e.g., Nicholas Jolley, “The Reception of Descartes’ Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 393–423. Jolley notes a “dramatic” and positive change in Descartes’ fortunes at this time, but he suggests, as the primary reason, increases in the appeal of his doctrines among non-scholastic theologians and anti-materialist philosophers (419). A more plausible explanation, I think, is offered by Peter A. Schouls, who argues (starting from a well-known passage from Condillac’s *Essay*) that with the rise of the Enlightenment, what seemed most important in Descartes was not his “vain and ambitious” doctrines but his promotion of a philosophical method that, while “eager to know whatever is within reach,” nevertheless “proportions [its] researches to the weakness of the human understanding” (*Descartes and the Enlightenment* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989], 9). Schouls is, of course, describing an explicit shift in intellectual history. Whether later metaphysics (and anti-metaphysics) is in principle any less “Cartesian” as a result of this shift is another question—a question which I am suggesting deserves a no more than a yes.
39. “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” PIH, 67; cf. Merleau-Ponty, PoP, 3, 266.



40. Wilson, 'History of Philosophy', 208–9/463. Cf. Catherine Wilson's assertion that we "non-historians" should "arguably, leave the history of philosophy to the specialist, and give over the time saved to cultivating contact with natural and social science" (Sorell and Rogers, 65).
41. For an argument that Descartes' appeal to the "collaboration" of the will and the understanding in explaining correct judgments is integral to the formal project of the *Meditations* and not a mere holdover from medieval psychology, see David M. Rosenthal, "Will and the Theory of Judgment," in EDM, 411–16.
42. See *Meditations*, AT, VII, 22, 47, 52; *Discourse*, AT, VI, 64; and *Meditations*, AT, VII, 81–2, respectively.
43. AT, VI, 28, my italics. Hence, John P. Carriero is right that the *Meditations* is not the expression of nor is it concerned with that "certain sort of epistemologist" who analytic philosophers imagine as the crusader against skepticism. Descartes surely is, at least in part, concerned instead to wean potential meditators (and thus potential advocates of mechanistic natural science) away from abstractionist and nativist conceptions of mind (*Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's 'Meditations'* [Princeton University Press, 2009], esp. ch. 1, on the First Meditation). Yet if this contextualizes the *Meditations* in terms of its own project and its own "meditative" terms (as Carriero, in a somewhat excessively Thomistic way, wants to do), it does not address the future problems set up when his project explicitly leaves behind topics to which it is allegedly inappropriate to apply the four rules. How many today are satisfied to "set aside" faith and politics while the epistemology of science is worked out (and its model for knowledge is thereby being given pride of place)? Isn't this what Bernard Williams does in concluding, with positivistic precision, that if it is only natural science that converges on absolute knowledge, then ethics must be "non-cognitive"?
44. A third option that retains some but not all of the Cartesian tenets albeit in a revised and "innocent" form rather than "unreconstructed" and at full strength is offered by Tom Sorell, *Descartes Reinvented* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Innocent Cartesianism, he says, is "partly a doctrine of human limitation"—a recognition that we are "not naturally cut out" for either "natural scientific understanding" or "an elevated moral and political life" (167), and this doctrine provides us with a way to combat the "current excesses" of both naturalism and anti-rationalism (ix). What I argue here, however, is that the problem is not their "excesses" but the fact that both positions—and any "doctrines" that might combat them—are all precisely expressions of Cartesianism. Cartesianism-lite is, as a philosophical orientation, still dependent upon understanding the philosophical ideal of cognizing from Nowhere.
45. Although I am not using this strategy for the same purpose, it is not altogether dissimilar to the strategy employed by Penelope Deutscher in *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction, and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997). The idea is that if we put all our interpretive energies into making historical figures consistent and systematic when they have tried but failed to be so on their own, this may help to obscure the very features of these authors that they were least able to address and that we, as their progeny, now most need to consider.
46. Although he hesitates to "go all hermeneutical about it," this is essentially the criticism Michael Della Rocca makes of Carriero's "Between Two Worlds," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 33, no. 7 (2009), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=16845>.



47. These issues are addressed in detail in, e.g., Lang, *Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, ch. 3; Hatfield, *Descartes and the 'Meditations'*; and in Menn's *Descartes and Augustine*.
48. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825–1826*, vol. 3, trans. Robert F. Brown and J.M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 131. I ignore here the question of how much Cartesianism remains in Hegel himself.
49. *PP*, 46–47, 45 n. 53; and part 3, ch. 1, “The Cogito,” 387–431, esp. 401–403). In *PoP*, Merleau-Ponty develops a critique of this sort of “intellectualism” and the God’s-eye view that it cultivates by arguing for a phenomenological return to the “tacit cogito”—i.e., the operative and embodied “myself experienced by myself” that, strictly speaking, becomes a cogito “only when it has found expression for itself” (425–26; cf. 264–65). This argument is insightfully reviewed and related to recent work in analytic epistemology by Charles Taylor, “Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture,” in *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26–49.
50. Letter to Princess Elizabeth, *AT*, III, 691; cited in *PoP*, 42 and 199. See also Merleau-Ponty, *PoP*, part 2, ch. 1, “Sense Experience,” 207–42; *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Unity of Body and Soul*, trans. Paul B. Milan (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 33–35; “The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 12–42; and *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), esp. 3–49, 272–73.
51. Hence, philosophical skepticism always depends on an equivocation it cannot acknowledge. To doubt as if from Nowhere—e.g., to question whether there is a world, or other people, or reliable knowledge—one must surreptitiously “borrow” from a factual existence that “is already there,” replete with worldly encounters and co-experienced with others, sometimes getting things right and sometimes not (*Visible and Invisible*, 106). Of course, once ordinary factual existence has been retroactively defined from Nowhere as “merely” subjective and untrustworthy, such borrowing cannot be discussed or even admitted.
52. Readers of Merleau-Ponty’s late work will know that he eventually came to think that even his best earlier efforts at a “phenomenological rediscovery of the perceptual world” were fatally flawed because, by beginning with a critique of Cartesianism, he retains a research framework and philosophical vocabulary that distort the very phenomena he wants to rediscover. Thus, e.g., *PoP* begins with the idea of working back *from* the standpoint of the Cartesian philosophy of the cogito *to* the embodied existence and “tacit cogito” one might find “under” it, even though everyday thinking is poorly served by the imagery of mathematicized cognition, only looser and less self-conscious (*Visible and Invisible*, 170, 175). And, of course most glaringly, there is Merleau-Ponty’s early focus on perception, whose “primacy” he defends against “intellectualist” efforts to transcend it in favor of something clearer and more distinct—a focus that inevitably puts him in the untenable position of promising to *move on* to *other* topics like politics, culture, and history, as if perceptual life were not already political, cultural, and historical from the start. Hence, Merleau-Ponty’s late working notes contain plans for a book that would move beyond the limits of (his Husserlian-inspired and so still structurally and conceptually Cartesian) “phenomenology” toward a genuinely philosophical “ontology” of the human condition as it is actually



lived. See, e.g., *Visible and Invisible*, 167–68, 200, 272–73. For recent discussion, see Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), esp. 14–18, 75–78, 311–20. The whole issue concerning how to start from a phenomenological rediscovery of being in the midst of things will be a central topic in Chapter 7.



## 4 Comte, the Last Honest Positivist

### His Defense of “Being” One

In previous chapters, I considered the philosophical practices of Socrates and Descartes without filtering their views through the modern prejudices about philosophy’s proper (i.e., ahistorical and basically epistemological) outlook or the usual stories told about these thinkers as a result. I have tried to make a plausible case that Socrates and Descartes can, in their actual inquiries and in spite of appearances, tell us something about the way historical determinateness matters in thinking. But why Comte? What can we possibly learn about historicity from the founder of the very positivism whose ultimate form is just Cartesianism made rigorous? Even taken in its own terms, without the purifications of logical positivism, Comte’s conception of humanity’s future would seem to make him the poster child for scientific optimism. For him, scientific (i.e., “positive”) knowledge is the only real knowledge; its application to real-world situations is what will make us safe and happy; and becoming fully aware of these facts about science and about technology (he would have approved of calling them together, “technoscience”) will make safety and happiness come all the sooner. In other words, for Comte technoscience is nothing short of a consummating occurrence or world event—that is, the practical as well as theoretical “ending” or fulfillment of the Western intellectual tradition. Who could be more expressive of the idea of the “scientific philosopher” or more obviously the hyper-Cartesian source of the mythology of the all-seeing mind? In this chapter, I explain that these are not rhetorical questions, and their answers are not at all the obvious ones. In the end, Comte has much to teach us about how history matters to philosophy . . . and he knew it.

I start with what does seem obvious—namely, Comte’s “general view of positivism.” At first glance, any reclamation of his outlook in our post-positivist times seems doomed. According to his famous—and to him, philosophically fundamental—“law of the three stages,” we all begin intellectually as theologians and under the right conditions, we graduate first to abstract or metaphysical thinking, and then finally to science. Following after this cognitive development, given a necessary time lag, come the appropriate socio-political transformations—from primitive, militaristic and theocratic communities, to societies reflecting increasingly secular and



material interests organized by abstract principles or ideologies, and finally to peaceful, fully industrial societies guided by a genuine knowledge of the human condition and supported by a Religion of Humanity. For both theoretical and practical reasons, then, the task for philosophers in the current age is to become positivists, that is, to become fully and reflectively aware of the historically palpable, ever more pervasive character of the emerging technoscientific era, to explain it, justify it, and see that this is taught to others.

Yet Comte's positivist interpretation of history and his three-stage theory of its development have been widely misunderstood in either of two ways. First, because he is famously the "founder" of sociology (at first, he called it "social physics"), his "law-like" account of the rise of science and its technologies is often assumed to be a causally deterministic account. It is not. Comte does not think the coming technoscientific age entails either the complete suppression of other (i.e., non-technoscientific) possibilities or a specific and predictable future state produced by antecedent socio-historical conditions. The three-stage law is a developmental law—in the sense that it is no more causally necessary that everyone ends up a perfectly positive thinker than it is that we all end up making identical and maximally sophisticated use of our native languages, or that at any given moment one's reinforcement history dictates what we say.

Second, because of the "meta-narrative" reach of his account, Comte's law is often construed as the linchpin of an old-fashioned speculative philosophy of history. His position, however, is neither teleological nor essentialist in the requisite sense. Although he happily regards all current promotions of non-scientific alternatives as regressive and eagerly depicts philosophy's future in scientistic terms; he does not think that progress toward this future is metaphysically necessary or the actualization of something like humanity's technoscientific entelechy. Comte's account of the rise of technoscience is, I think, something actually much more interesting than either of these mistaken interpretations can tell us.

Indeed, in this chapter, I want to encourage the idea that Comte's account is not just interesting but currently relevant. In my view, Comte's progressivist, technoscientific optimism is no mere relic of the nineteenth century. Nor is it merely a theoretical or political outlook, still held by some people, applied on some occasions, to some experiences. Comte thinks of his account of the rise of an age of technoscience as a reflective projection—from within his present circumstances—of how the good life is destined to be experienced and understood in our increasingly post-theological and post-metaphysical era. As he describes it, this "third stage" is working itself out as the ultimate way for us to *be*, in its full, intellectual and practical articulation. Comte's sometimes hyperbolic language can make this account seem a somewhat exaggerated and dated, yet it should also sound very familiar. It is the default language that is still widely used to define what it means to "be" in an increasingly technoscientific world. Comte's outlook



is by no means as dated as one would expect after positivism as a movement has allegedly died. Indeed, his paeon to technoscientific life—his portrayal of our last and most “mature” condition—still serves quite well as a description of the background understanding of most Western technocrats, as well as mainstream epistemologists and philosophers of mind, science, and technology.

In contrast to many other philosophers who share his general outlook, however, it is fair to call Comte the last honest positivist—that is, a positivist who is more philosophically forthcoming than, say, the authors of the logical positivists’ manifesto, about *being* a positivist. He actually identifies and defends a scientific-technological understanding of the human condition that many others, for various reasons and to varying degrees, still embrace but only silently and as if it were self-evident. And if we find it harder to actually embrace and advocate the condition Comte describes—that is, if we experience being in the midst of a technoscientific era with less optimism and enthusiasm and as more of a “burden” (in Nietzsche’s sense) than he does—Comte’s description is still deeply telling of precisely the current intellectual atmosphere in which we feel less comfortable. This is why, as I have argued elsewhere, Comte seems to me the one positivist who retains his contemporary relevance after positivism as a movement has run its course.<sup>1</sup> His historico-critical articulation of how it is to be in the midst of things strikes me as more concretely deserving than the Descartes of Hegel’s “Land ho”—though with the additional difference that our reaction to Comte may express a more “existential” discomfort, rather than less of the sort of metaphysical satisfaction that Hegel felt in the presence of Descartes.

In order to demonstrate the contemporaneity I am claiming for Comte’s views—and thus to show how history matters to him in a way that is still kin to how it matters today—I begin with a few comparisons between nineteenth- and twentieth-century positivism.

## COMTE’S ORIGINAL POSITIVISM AND ITS SHADOW(S)

To begin with an obvious objection: How can I say that positivism has any real presence in the twenty-first century, let alone that its nineteenth-century version is now its most relevant form (and even that it still speaks to self-described postpositivists), when it is hard to find anyone who admits to being even sympathetic to positivism? The answer is obvious but not simple. Rejecting the doctrines of positivism—and even rejecting positivism as the “scientific view of the world”—need not entail rejecting the orientation that produces them. Let me explain this point somewhat indirectly.

According to the so-called Yellow Brochure of 1929—the famous logical positivist manifesto composed by Neurath and others, on the occasion of Schlick’s return to Vienna from Stanford—twentieth-century philosophers must be philosopher of science, and philosophers of science need to



make two commitments. They must provide a formal analysis of the scientific method, and they must be empiricists about the range of this method's application. These two commitments together express "the scientific view of world" that is appropriate to philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, this logical positivist self-portrait that has received the bulk of the critical attention. There is, however, another side to the manifesto that was played down by its authors and largely ignored by their critics. After defining the logical positivist worldview, Neurath observes that those who embrace it typically also share similar ethical, social, and political opinions. But he hastens to assure us that this fact, however interesting in itself, is no topic for philosophy. Philosophy is about the rational reconstruction of the method for testing propositions. It is about meaning and truth, not about the "shared sentiments" of those who happen to pursue this topic. If we take Neurath at his word, then it is easy to assume that logical positivism is—as Passmore once said—about as dead as a philosophical movement ever becomes.<sup>3</sup> Today, no one admits to being a logical empiricist or positivist. Rational reconstruction, the stress on the verification but never the discovery of theories, the tendency to model all thought on nineteenth-century physics, emotivism in ethics and politics—all the main features of the positivist program have been rejected. Yet how thorough has this rejection really been? How genuinely "*post*positivist" is the opposition to logical positivism's scientific worldview? The answer, I think, has little to do with the explicit rejection of the logical positivist program and everything to do with the so-called "sentiments" that Neurath links to it but insists that philosophers do not have to talk about.

Note, first, that much of the opposition to logical positivism has involved criticism of some of its overt features by means of a silent embrace of its underlying conception of science and its superior epistemic status.<sup>4</sup> To object, for example, that the "discovery" of scientific theories is just as important philosophically as the question of their justification, does nothing to challenge the assumption that the confirmation of predictive theories is the "essence" of scientific practice or that something like warrantability is the essence of the meaningfulness of all language. Similarly, to argue that epistemological formalism distorts the "discourse of science" by throwing up an artificial division between the logic and the employment of scientific procedures, does nothing to challenge the "scientism" of the positivistic worldview.<sup>5</sup> Again, to argue that there are "other" sciences with "other" purposes using "other" methods that logical positivism distorts or ignores, does nothing to dislodge the epistemic prejudice in favor of the mathematical and physical sciences, or in favor of, say, quantification as the primary mode of scientific conceptualization. And to give one more example, for all the criticism of logical positivism's explicit program, it is still not part of the mainstream agenda to include information about what is it like to engage in scientific practice, or who does it, for what purposes, at what costs, and for whose benefit. Science Studies is not mainstream philosophy of science.



In short, opposing logical positivism's program remains a vehicle by means of which many philosophers, some willingly or many more in spite of themselves, continue to share logical positivism's general "sentiments." But of course, "sentiments" is not the right term.<sup>6</sup> It is the term the logical positivists use to denigrate something they don't want to think about—something that influences their thinking more profoundly than mere sentiments could ever do. For in spite of their disclaimers, the allegedly irrelevant "opinions" they really do "share" are not about politics and society, but about the proper place of science in human affairs and about the superiority of science-mindedness in dealing with these affairs. In its scientific "spirit," says Neurath, logical positivism is "close to the life of the present."<sup>7</sup> In fact, what they share is not so much "opinions," as it is a quite general sense of *how to be philosophical in a technoscientific age*. They share, in other words, the same vital understanding of how to think about our dealings with whatever is real that has made positivists positivists since the early nineteenth century. From at least John Stuart Mill to the last logical positivist, there is general agreement with what Carnap wrote 1928. Whenever our worldview faces theological or metaphysical opposition, he asserts, we can be sure that science will in the end be "set free" from religion and metaphysics. Our confidence

stems from the knowledge, or put . . . more carefully, *the belief that those opposing powers belong to the past*. We feel that there is an inner kinship between the attitude on which our philosophical work is founded and the intellectual attitude which presently manifests itself in entirely different walks of life. . . . We feel all around us the same basic orientation, the same style of thinking and doing. It is an orientation which demands clarity everywhere . . .<sup>8</sup>

Call it a feeling of "inner kinship" as Carnap does here, or call it the positivist "sentiment" as Neurath does in the Yellow Brochure, the point about it is same. Share it silently, and get on with the real job of analyzing scientific language and rationality. Philosophy, after all, is not psychology or social science.

Whatever we call it, however, this feeling/belief/sentiment has a strikingly strange status. It is philosophically irrelevant, and at the same time definitive of the right attitude for post-religious and post-metaphysical thinker. Sometimes, this strangeness is covered over (e.g., by Neurath and Schlick) with the argument that the relevance and growing popularity of their outlook is confirmed by social science. But of course this is question-begging. Logical positivism *begins* as a research program by taking its stand on the promise of science and the philosophical necessity of rationally reconstructing its method. At best, empirical research can tell us that people are *increasingly coming to feel* the same way. For a logical positivist, this can perhaps be gratifying, but it is in principle ultimately irrelevant whether everyone or very few have thus far come to share their "belief." The priority of



science, the rejection of metaphysics, and everywhere, the “demand for clarity” is justified anyway. One simply “belongs to the past” in not seeing this.

My purpose here, however, is not just to repeat the now familiar criticism of positivism’s reflexive failure—the old and easy accusation of self-refutation. I am objecting only to the lack of candor involved in waving away any discussion of its “view of the world” as extra-philosophical, instead of identifying this view for what it is—namely, the articulation of a partly inherited, partly reaffirmed, modified and transformed sense of how these philosophers see themselves “in the midst of things.” Putnam (at least the Putnam of 1983), commenting on Neurath’s famous simile of “the republic of science” as a boat that is constantly reconstructing itself at sea, insists on two modifications. First, we must “put ethics, philosophy, in fact the whole of culture, in the boat,” and second, in order to acknowledge the interdependency of the parts of any culture, we must also think “not of *a* boat but of a *fleet*” of interacting boats. “It’s all a bit chaotic,” he admits, but “if we hanker after more, is that not our old and unsatisfiable yearning for Absolutes?”<sup>9</sup> Precisely.

Yet Comte, my candidate for the currently most interesting positivist, would find Putnam’s remarks both mislocated and spoken in the wrong register. His remarks come as the conclusion of an essay, and reflect some cognitive regret. For Comte, these remarks are at best merely an astute opening statement of what should be philosophy’s premier topic, and there is nothing regrettable about the intellect never doing more than bringing *some* order to disorderly life. In Putnam, moreover, the image of interacting boats only presents us with an abstract and summary characterization of the fact *that* all philosophizing is a concrete, historical, and reflective practice. Comte, however, would ask Putnam for his account of *how* history actually matters . . . to those who are in these boats and could describe themselves as living through an era when Putnam thinks it right to say, “In philosophy, as in everything else, we are at the beginning of a post-modernism.”<sup>10</sup>

This is where Comte himself tries to begin—that is, on a scientifically promising sea. In his earliest essays, he struggles to identify how we are to understand what Carnap calls the “intellectual attitude which presently manifests itself” everywhere; he calls it the “positive spirit”; and he eagerly makes it THE philosophical topic. Like his progeny, he certainly thinks intellectual maturity involves being “oriented” toward “clarity,” and he argues that this is essential to the positive spirit. But that is just it: he *argues* that it is essential. He would have been appalled to learn that when later positivists concentrate on analyzing scientific rationality, they continue to rely on but now refuse to discuss the fundamentally similar understanding of their circumstances they inherit from him.

Here, we can see a fundamental difference between the later positivists and Comte—one that is much more telling than any of the more obvious differences in their epistemologies. To be sure (and I will come back to this), Comte opposes the idea of a formal reconstruction of the scientific method,



but both privilege philosophy's epistemic task and both understand "knowledge" scientistically. To Comte, however, it is a philosopher's first obligation to reflect upon and defend this understanding (as he does above all in his *Cours de philosophie positive*). A positivist must begin by answering the question, Why one should *be* and how does one *become* a positivist in this increasingly post-metaphysical age?<sup>11</sup> Later positivists, in their "Carnapian" way, acknowledge no such obligation and simply speak easily and dismissively of "pre-scientific" attitudes instead.

It is for this reason that I call Comte the last completely honest positivist. Later positivists "believe" and want us to "share" their objectivistic conviction that the philosopher's proper outlook is formalist, neutral, decontextualized, and epistemically "monological"—that one must aspire to philosophize from Nowhere.<sup>12</sup> The hard truth is, however, that the more firmly later positivists embraced this allegedly neutral and decontextualized image of what it is like to advocate the "scientific worldview" and the more resolutely they suppressed their extra-philosophical "sentiments," the more obvious it became that their neutral and decontextualized orientation is nothing of the kind. Positivism has never been a philosophy from Nowhere. It has always been in fact a very determinately historical movement. This is what eventually came to seem obvious from the doctrines it produced. All of their objectivistic doctrines—the formalistic reconstructions, the verificationism, the pinched and dated image of scientific practice, the reduction of values to expressions of feeling—are out of fashion. Yet deprived of their support, the actual—and deeply Comtean—orientation that gave rise to these doctrines offers itself up as a possible philosophical topic.

Perhaps the harder truth, however, is that if there is no objectivist epistemology, there can also be no objectivist critique of it. Critics who do not see this end up arguing positivistically against the logical positivist program—as, I think, many supposedly postpositivist, pragmatist, and even phenomenological philosophers have in fact unwittingly done. Hence, the title of my book on Comte is also a slogan. There as here, I reconsider Comte "after positivism." My point is that rejection of all the items in logical positivism's explicit program that will not guarantee the overcoming of positivism. I will have more to say about this issue later on but for now let us just note that abandoning doctrines is easily done without changing the philosophical perspective from which the doctrines initially seemed appealing. Hence, to focus entirely on rejecting logical positivism's reconstructive program without questioning the standpoint of the older positivism that inspired this program in the first place, may well encourage the idea that one has become more successfully ahistorical and objective by "opposing" one's predecessors. As others have observed, too often critiques of logical positivism have left us not with genuinely postpositivist thinkers but with positivism lite.<sup>13</sup>

On this issue, reconsidering Comte himself can help. He begins by explicitly identifying positivism as expressive of a general intellectual orientation—in



my terms, the articulation of a vital understanding, not just a belief, feeling, or sentiment plus a collection of epistemic strategies. He thus acknowledges that his orientation is something he is obliged to reflect upon. As we will see, this leads him to draw a number of conclusions about the scientific worldview that, I think, we ignore at our peril. For one thing, Comte claims that science, rather than constituting a rejection of the pre-scientific orientations of theology and metaphysics, accomplishes its purpose by preserving and transforming them. If he is right about this, then “overcoming” positivism must entail raising ontological doubts about its underlying sense of purpose, not just updating the political and epistemic ideas that positivists (and others) have based on it.

Moreover, if he is right that both pre-scientific and scientific “views of the world” are general orientations—“ways of philosophizing,” he says—rather than collections of theories, beliefs, or feelings, then none of these “views” are—as I showed in Chapter 1 they are often taken to be—really “options” that one might embrace or set aside at will. Comte regards his positivism as articulating a general understanding of reality he already finds himself living through—rather like the way we find at a certain point that we have and speak a native language. We can take it for granted, use it, adapt it to perceived new circumstances, be reflective or unreflective about it, imagine having a different orientation; yet even if we find ourselves less satisfied with the scientific view of the world than Comte, we cannot (as Taylor says) simply walk away from it in favor of another choice, any more than we can decide to have another native language or “regress” to an earlier condition we now picture in idyllic terms. In certain moods, one can miss the way we all conversed as children, guilelessly and without much subtlety. But this is adult nostalgia; that stage is gone. And so is a world without technoscience.

In short, reconsidering positivism with Comte’s help allows us to think through what even the loudest critics of positivism often seem insufficiently radical to acknowledge. Both positivistic and anti-positivistic “sentiments” emerge from the same basic vital understanding. Both are Cartesian derivatives that encourage the destructive fantasy that we still might, if we make a “better choice,” actually transform our “view of the world” into one that really allows us to think and plan as if from Nowhere.<sup>14</sup>

One further preliminary remark. It is the view of many positivists, but not my own, that “technology” is simply the blanket term for all the *applications* of science.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I will try to show that it is not Comte’s view, either. Indeed, technology is, for him (as for Heidegger), actually the philosophically prior phenomenon because it is in our technological practices—both before and after the rise of modern science—that human beings express their most fundamental ontological sense of what there is and what they want. Science is simply the last and the most successful vehicle for enacting this basic sense of things. I will therefore use the term “technoscience” wherever the context calls for it, with the assumption that it is no



longer possible to imagine a world in which technology in any sense might still be experienced as a phenomenon separate from science.

### COMTE'S THREE-STAGE LAW OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

How, then, does Comte understand the present age? John Stuart Mill, in his correspondence with him, complains that Comte's telling the story of what came before science is a waste of time. We are *in* the age of science, Mill asserts. Explaining how we got here is a bit like reporting on a finished race as if we did not know its winner. Mill, like the logical positivists, "feels" the scientific spirit all around him. But Comte does not, and says so. The present age, he says, is *going to be* the age of science. He thinks of himself as living in a period of transition between metaphysical and scientific understanding. Positive philosophers are thus obliged to defend this transition, by explaining what scientific thinking is and why it is superior to the thinking typical of previous ages.

Yet defending the transition to a scientific age is not the only reason Comte has for discussing the earlier ages when theology and metaphysics were dominant. Making "science" intelligible depends on *comparing* it with earlier sorts of intellectual practice. Ideas, he says, can only be understood through their history. The idea of science is no exception. Science did not and cannot result from merely turning our collective backs on, in Carnap's phrase, what belongs to the past. The point is to see how scientific thinking actually constitutes a transformation, not rejection, of theological and metaphysical thinking. Indeed, the superiority of the theories of science lies in precisely the fact that they do the same thing as theological and metaphysical theories, only better. In Comte's view, all our thinking from the very beginning has expressed two related aims—namely, to control nature and to organize peaceful societies. As it turns out, only the "positive" knowledge generated by science can fulfill these aims.

Comte's conception of the "positivity" of positive philosophy is rich and multifaceted, in comparison to the pinched and reductive meaning given to it by later positivists and reinforced by the expositions of them by their critics.<sup>16</sup> In the *Discours*, Comte explains that the adjective, "positive," as it applies to his philosophical orientation, should be understood as having at least six interrelated senses (DEP, 126–30/64–71)—that is, positivism is concerned with what is (i) real (i.e., actually accessible to the human intellect, not merely imagined as controlling everything from behind the scenes); (ii) useful (to the genuine improvement of the human condition), (iii) certain (as opposed to encouraging indecision), (iv) precise (as opposed to vague), (v) constructive (as opposed to "negative," or merely critical, divisive, or skeptical), and (vi) relative (in the sense of always responsive to the degree and kind of evidence, not expressible in absolute and unmodifiable claims).



Comte's *Système*, in keeping with his later addition of benevolent love to his earlier slogan of "order and progress," adds "sympathetic" as a seventh meaning (SPP1, 58/45). His point is that only mature, third-stage reasoning is sufficiently open and receptive to fully recognizing the significance of all these characteristics taken together.<sup>17</sup>

The success of cognition in the positive sciences is therefore measured by the degree to which it *affirms* the results of disciplined observation, rather than merely *criticizes* and *opposes* the claims of others or engages in abstract and *empirically ungrounded* speculation. As the italicized words and phrases suggest, however, evaluation of both the structure and the function of science must include a careful and sympathetic analysis of how prescientific philosophy tries but falls short of achieving these same aims. Comte defends this position in many places over several decades, but always in terms of his famous three-stage law. In the remainder of this section, I offer a few more comments concerning his overall position; in the next three sections, I discuss each of the three stages in greater detail.<sup>18</sup>

According to Comte's law, "by its very nature . . . human intelligence in all its inquiries must of necessity pass successively through three different theoretical stages: the theological or fictive, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive."<sup>19</sup> Comte's conception of human intelligence is what we now call developmental. Science, like theology and metaphysics is a "stage [*état*]," not a static state but an emerging condition, both in itself and with respect to earlier and later conditions.<sup>20</sup> Hence, simply criticizing theology and metaphysics in the name of science would be a bit like criticizing the grammatical limitations of a two-year-old from the standpoint of an adult language user. Moreover, although the law is undoubtedly first and foremost about human intelligence, it would be a mistake to assume that it is exclusively about cognition. To really "know" the comings and goings of our surroundings involves cognition, imagination, feeling, volition—in a word, all the capacities that function together to constitute human intelligence. Moreover, the point of knowledge is that it gives us "prevision," that is, comprehension of the principles of natural and social activity.<sup>21</sup> The practical employment of those principles so far known by us has already begun to improve our lives dramatically, and it promises to continue to do so even more after we make this explicit to ourselves.

Comte's account of the rise and development of the extant natural and life sciences, and of the possibility of genuine social science as well, must be understood within the context of his larger story about human biological, social, cultural, and political development. The main value of the three-stage law is that it can show us what we may still become, given what we have already been. It is not just about human cognition considered abstractly or structurally or in itself. It is about how strictly intellectual (he sometimes uses the older term, "spiritual") developments ultimately shape practical and social (sometimes, "temporal") activity. "From science," says Comte, "comes



[genuine and efficacious] prevision; from prevision comes [genuinely productive and satisfying] action.” I have added in brackets what applies specifically to the third stage. The positivist slogan, “Order and Progress,” articulates this principle. The idea is that science provides knowledge of the natural and social “order,” and the applications of this knowledge facilitate “progress” in real life.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the original positivism of Comte, then, it would be wrong to interpret his analysis of human rationality as an “epistemology” in today’s familiar sense of providing a theory of knowledge, truth, and/or justified belief. He would find what we now call epistemology deficient in at least three ways—namely, as suffering from an excessive tendency toward formalization (i.e., where the topic is *the* way[s] to reason and *the* criteria of rationality), as overemphasizing the present (i.e., where only what we twenty-first-century Westerners in “developed” countries hold about the topic carries real philosophical weight), and finally as displaying a certain narrowness and reductiveness (i.e., by typically starting with the proper functioning strictly of cognition and deeming the consideration of “contextual” issues at best optional and at worst diverting). For Comte, by contrast, the most important philosophical feature of any thinking—theological, metaphysical, or scientific—is that it is a human activity, a way of interacting with our surroundings, with a very definite underlying sense of why it matters. We must understand that this activity *occurs* in three successive ways, and that these represent three global “approaches” to our overall circumstances. Comte calls these approaches successive “ways of philosophizing.” Each arises from a distinctive sense of experiential encounter with our natural and social surroundings, and this is articulated in a distinctive type of theorizing (Comte uses the old-fashioned term, “speculation,” meaning simply abstract thought, for all three types). The later stages build upon the strengths and struggle to overcome the weaknesses of the previous ones, and the ultimate measure of their success is what they enable us to do in and with the natural and social world.

Comte’s law is designed to illuminate these developments from several perspectives. Psychologically, it identifies the main stages of individual intellectual growth. Epistemologically, it explains how each science realizes its ultimate aim by passing through the stages appropriate to it.<sup>23</sup> Sociopolitically, it depicts the rise of human societies in their religious, military, industrial, and legal activities as following, with a time lag, intellectual progress. Historically, it depicts the stages and their socio-political expressions in the whole of humanity over time. Finally, behind all these “analytical” perspectives, there lies an idea of human progress that Comte himself may be happy about but that he believes in any case represents the inevitable developmental tendency of our species, bent upon fulfilling our needs. In discussing each stage, I emphasize especially Comte’s general historical articulation of them—as does Comte himself in both the introductory lessons of his *Cours* and in the *Discours*.



**PRE-SCIENTIFIC HISTORY I: THEOLOGY**

According to Comte, famously, theology constitutes our necessary intellectual “childhood.” Yet if his claim is well-known, his interpretation of it is often misunderstood. Primitive cultures, young human beings, and fledgling versions of what will become disciplines may all begin by thinking theologically, but for Comte, this does not mean either that their fundamental motivations are different from those of mature cultures, adults, and established sciences or that their superstitions and god-talk are merely about some non-existent entities in which grown-ups eventually stop believing. For Comte, as I noted above, all human thinking in all three of its stages, whatever else it may be about and whatever other effects it may have, is rooted in the same basic motivation—namely, a markedly optimistic desire to sustain or restore natural harmony and organize for social peace.

Between the lines of all his descriptions of intellectual and social development, one can see Comte’s implicit understanding of how it has been and how it is supposed to be between human beings and their surroundings. Under primitive intellectual conditions, we confidently assume that nature is predictable and at least benign, if not always actually supportive. Day is supposed to follow night. Mountains are at worst supposed to rumble, but not to spew lava over whole villages. There is supposed to be enough to eat. People are supposed to be able to live together without killing each other. Pleasure is supposed to supplant pain. It is not that there are no surprises or mysteries, but what surprises and mysteries we do encounter are supposed to be either enjoyable or soluble or at least tolerable.

Of course, just a few days of life and a few years of social existence tell us that things are not always so easy; and in “maturity,” we know very well what a struggle it always is to make things right and how rare it is when harmony and peace just happen. For Comte, however, this struggle is never experienced as completely devoid of a sense that things can be fixed. In other words, what we now call scientific optimism is for him not something essentially scientific at all. We might better call it existential optimism, expressive of Comte’s interpretation of how humans always understand things to “be.” As I will explain later, this positive sense of things is easiest to detect in his defense of the “maturity” of the scientific stage, but it also informs, if not so obviously, even his conception of the religious ideas and practices of our youngest selves and most remote ancestors.

In primitive human life, according to Comte, cognition begins in experiences of mysterious and disturbing ruptures in what is thus otherwise taken to be a predictable world. Things just keep doing the unexpected and threatening. Reactions to these events are at first spontaneous—and, of course, largely a matter of instinct and emotion. Both historically as a species and biographically as individuals, we initially lack both reliable theories about our surroundings (which, after all, would have to be based on previous observations) and fruitful observations (which would need guidance



from reliable theories). We would therefore have remained forever within an intellectual “vicious circle,” were it not for the “spontaneous conceptualizations” made by our immature minds. In the beginning, then, instinctual/emotional reactions to unexpected encounters serve as a substitute for the sort of disciplined, data-collecting “observations” that could provide us with real science, and the imaginative speculations to which these initial reactions give rise are the substitute for what scientists call “theories.” Afraid or awe-struck in the presence of some apparently uncontrollable natural force (e.g., an eclipse, earthquake, or epidemic), people are excited by these feelings into thinking about the actually experienced thing itself as presenting a frightful or awesome countenance. And since at this point we lack a pre-established theoretical repertoire, we relate the event to the only sense of causality we already have, namely, our own wills. Hence, all of our earliest conceptualizations of our experience of frightful or awesome things depict them as alive with powers or energy analogous to but (given the evidence of the present encounter) greater than the human will. The formation of such analogies is the first sign of “philosophical” activity—designed as it is to “explain” the strangeness of unexpected events.

*Fetishism*, or animism is thus the earliest form of theology. It emerges as a direct, experience-based, imaginative response to surprising and disturbing encounters with our otherwise routine and predictable surroundings. Like all subsequent forms of philosophy, it is also thoroughly practical-minded in its intention. It aims to restore sense and order to a temporarily disrupted natural existence—so that we can get on with life. And by also giving us guidance for ritual and social interaction, theological speculation, even in this most archaic form, grounds our original form of universal praxis. For Comte, prayer and ritual form the basis of what is essentially our first technology—that is, our first global effort to accommodate and restore the disrupted relations that initially stimulated our speculations.

Over our lengthy period of “infancy,” however, the ultimately unacceptable character of these spontaneously produced, fetishistic “theories” eventually becomes all too evident. As accounts of disruptions in our “normally” harmonious relations, they *imply* that our true condition is one of total subordination to arbitrary external powers. The idea of “implication” here is typical of Comte’s exposition of the three-stage law. Unlike the kind “scientific” accounts promoted by his progeny (and indeed embraced by Comte himself when he is characterizing explanation in physics or chemistry), he gives a generalized description of the sorts of things that would occur in the minds of those who are living through, as here, the initially promising but ultimately unsatisfying animistic way of interpreting disruptions to their surroundings. Thus, if these disruptions are in fact just manifestations of a world full of entities with wills of their own, then fetishism neither explains this world nor promises any relief from undesirable surprises. According to its theories, things just do what they do, and we are powerless to stop them. Such a conclusion, notes Comte, is both intellectually unsatisfying



and pragmatically intolerable. Moreover, in the aggregate, our experience does not even seem to square with this negative double conclusion. It is not clearly the case that unexpected events “just happen” (i.e., are always merely arbitrary expressions of power); nor is it obvious that events are always out of our control. As the mind ponders these matters, it gradually turns from fetishism to *polytheism*.

Polytheistic philosophizing differs from fetishism in several ways. As just indicated, it is stimulated not only by feelings of awe or fear but also by a growing sense of dissatisfaction with fetishistic responses to these feelings. As a result, the mind begins to employ the imagination to speculate about other more promising conceptual responses and eventually settles on the possibility of explaining events by conceiving them as driven by “hidden powers” or causes, that is, invisible divinities controlling not just this or that particular event but whole classes of similar events (e.g., the sun god is responsible for the behavior of the sun generally, not just one eclipse). For the polytheist, it is not the experienced thing that has the mysterious power; it is the god “of” such things that is controlling them. Eventually these controlling hidden causes are systematized into a pantheon of invisible gods pictured as presiding together over the natural and social world.

In Comte’s account of polytheism, and especially in his comparisons of it backward toward fetishism and forward toward monotheism, we can already see the outlines of the case he ultimately wants to make for the “maturity” of scientific thinking. On the one hand, in contrast to fetishism, polytheism shifts the focus away from the “existent” things we experience to the “phenomenal generalities” (i.e., the awe- or fear-inspiring *kinds* of actions or motions) whose manifestation in the appearance of these things catches our attention in the first place (or so we imagine). This alteration of attention is crucial for all later cognitive advancement, because it suggests for the first time the possibility of systematic intellectual abstraction: Never mind the things we see. What *makes* them the kinds of things we see?

At the same time, this abstractive move seems paradoxically to draw the world closer to us both theoretically and practically than fetishism does. Theoretically speaking, if control of the phenomenal generalities of things is a function of divine wills instead of arbitrary material forces, this suggests that the true course of things is determined by beings (i.e., the hidden divinities) analogous to ourselves (for we know from our own case what it is like to will something according to a plan or purpose). Practically speaking, if what we experience are not just the powerful things themselves operating mysteriously and arbitrarily, but things that are under the hidden control of the wills of gods who seem in principle to be comprehensible, then the world is a potentially predictable place after all. And perhaps, with sufficient reverence for these gods and some understanding of their purposes, they may modify the course of future events in a friendly direction, especially if one suspects that these gods might care about us. However, the



deepest *scientific* implication of this theoretical and practical transformation does not fully come to light until much later. For when the polytheistic mind conceives the restoration of satisfying relations between ourselves and the world as depending on our understanding the wills and purposes of the gods, it makes spontaneous use of what we in retrospect recognize to be the prototype of the modern epistemic model of thinking subjects seeking the right theories about the world regarded as external object(s). In our terms, the polytheistic mind is learning how to think representatively and how to set up a correspondence model of truth.

Yet on the other hand, in contrast to the monotheism to come, the speculations of polytheism are still at best mere creations of the imagination, intimately expressive of and responsive to our immediately felt everyday experiences. If this makes polytheistic theories practically appealing, it also causes them to remain conceptually unclear and inconsistent. (Think of Socrates asking Euthyphro if he really believes *all* those stories about the gods, their enmities, and their follies.) When dissatisfaction with the conceptual limitations of polytheistic theory grows strong enough (e.g., when the very idea of more than one “supreme” being comes to seem hopelessly illogical), genuinely rational concepts begin to displace imaginative “images,” and the transition is made to *monotheism*.

According to Comte, even monotheism, like all forms of theology, originates from feelings or instincts stimulated by everyday experiences of the unexpected, but unlike the earlier forms of theology, its theories reflect reason’s success in gaining the upper hand in responding to these experiences. Superstitions that survive into monotheism are given some sort of “rational” gloss, and the imagination is permitted to contribute to accounts of divine causality only in ways that do not disrupt the formation of explanations that are logically and coherently organized and in which the whole surrounding world is conceived as a single cosmos. Polytheism’s efforts to organize its thoughts about the divinities are only partially successful, precisely because “many gods” cannot be the principle of explanation for “one” universe (i.e., the world can be neither run nor created by a committee). With monotheism, however, the developing human mind arrives at a genuine “system” of knowledge. There is a cosmos, or universe, and it is created by, or is at least under the power of a single god who acts or moves, not capriciously as in earlier theologies, but in accordance with a set of universal and invariable laws.

From one angle, then, monotheistic theology is an obvious “intellectual” improvement. Its cosmology is rational and systematic—at least to the extent allowed by whatever feelings and commitments to superstition and authority are definitive for a given religion—and its rituals and codes of behavior allow for more consciously rule-governed and orderly communities. In the end, however, Comte is not very kind to monotheism. He admits that against the imaginative and illogical character of earlier forms of theology, monotheism is the inevitable corrective; yet its resulting picture of



things is, in ways that are not obvious at first, deeply unsatisfying both theoretically and practically.

After a time, it begins to grow obvious that even the “rationality” of monotheism’s theories about how God’s laws work is pretty shallow. These theories may all be linked together in a logical manner, but the theories themselves remain incurably vague and abstract—which is not really surprising, since for monotheists the whole point is simply that they are God’s laws. In the end, “God did it” may comfort those who feel that their ultimate divinity, being ultimate, is by definition capable of doing anything, but it is not much of an “explanation.” Moreover, speaking in terms of practice, the god who applies these laws seems increasingly remote from human affairs. It is with monotheism, not polytheism, that cosmological and ethical theories grow “otherworldly.” Indeed, in Comte’s unflattering portrayal, the very point that the monotheistic mind comes most to insist on—namely, that there is an essential disjunction between divine and human natures—virtually guarantees that its theories will undermine all sense of any fundamental (albeit sometimes disrupted) intimacy with our surroundings that lies at the heart of our original experiences of the surrounding world.

Nevertheless, Comte’s purpose in these criticisms is not to denigrate monotheism; it is rather to sympathetically reconstruct its place in our intellectual development in order to see how it is both necessary and surpassable. It is therefore important to see both that monotheism is, from the standpoint of what comes before, a kind of completion of this first intellectual stage, and also from a developmental standpoint, the beginning of inevitable “decay” for the theological era. Once the polytheistic imagination awakens reason, monotheistic speculation is ultimately forced on us by our sense that, for all its mystery and variety, the surrounding world is one “connected” whole. In the theological stage, however, the search for an intellectual system that articulates this “urge to unity,” is almost wholly abstract and purely conceptual, and it is actually achieved at the expense of our more primitive and lived experience of the connectedness of all things. Comte sees monotheism as thus both intellectually unavoidable and a kind of betrayal of the admirably concrete and intimate sort of original relatedness to our natural and social surroundings—a betrayal that will not be undone until the mind matures enough to understand the need and the value of experimental observation.

Signs of such maturity are, of course, only rudimentary at first. Unavoidably, the stimulus of instincts, feelings, and reliance on superstition still functions in place of genuine “observation.” To the immature mind, the “mere” recording of resemblance and succession, which scientists understand is the key to real knowledge, simply cannot seem important enough to attract any sustained attention. At this point, Comte explains, the mind must be “overstimulated”—that is, feelings and imagination must stir our intellectual powers sufficiently to make it seem possible for us to understand our surroundings *by* solving life’s greatest mysteries (e.g., why things happen,



what's "behind" the appearances we see, why we're here, what happens after we die). No answers to these Big Questions are ever found, of course, yet the search for them is what drives our first attempts to subdue the unknown and mysterious by means of thought. Monotheistic speculation shows the mind that logical and systematic theorizing is possible, just as the earlier theological substages make us aware of our feelings and the power of our imagination. All of these powers will eventually figure properly together in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, but if we are ever to understand what this means, we must develop and maintain an appreciation of the functioning of all our intellectual powers, not just focus on rationality in the narrow sense of cognition. (So, e.g., Comte would side with postpositivist and science studies critiques of logical positivism's rigid, internalist division between the "mere" discovery of scientific theories and the philosophically "essential" concern with their justification. For him, as for these critics, this division reflects a bloated and unhistorical sense of the importance of pure cognition in scientific practice.)

In the end, then, no theological conception of our surroundings can be intellectually satisfying, since in spite of its surface rationality it inevitably depends more on feeling and imagination than on reason. Even the most "rational" religion is ultimately loyal first of all to something other than reason, and it is precisely monotheism that demonstrates this. It gradually dawns on us that if there is such a thing as cosmic necessity, then the mind's real subject must be the laws of this necessity and not the fact that any gods happen to approve and make of use them.<sup>24</sup> The political parallel is, of course, the implication—especially in Christianity—that we might consider the possibility of a viable social order independently of any theories about divinity. From the distinction between the City of Man and the City of God comes eventually the Enlightenment idea of an entirely secular state that God does not supervise. With the emergence of this theoretical—and eventually also practical—realization, thinking turns metaphysical.

## PRE-SCIENTIFIC HISTORY II: METAPHYSICS

Comte's idea of metaphysics and the metaphysical era has also been widely misinterpreted. Unlike the later positivists, he does not define either theology or metaphysics in scientistic terms, or regard their theories as cognitive nonsense. For him, both theology and metaphysics are perfectly meaningful, albeit ultimately unsuccessful activities without which there could have been no science. Indeed, what Comte says about the necessity and limitations of theology and metaphysics actually illuminates the rationale for the later positivists' silent and ungratefully dogmatic assumption of the superiority of science.

To Comte, the most important thing to notice about metaphysical thinking is that it helps the mind free itself from its original tendency to be



ruled by feeling, superstition, and authority, and to invest all its speculations with the idea that something extra- or supernatural—that is, something divine rather than worldly—controls our surroundings. In the metaphysical stage, the mind uses its liberated rational powers to develop an appreciation for mathematics and logic, and to make the transition from supernaturalism to naturalism. To see how this liberation takes place, one must understand why the metaphysical era has earlier and later phases, but no actual sub-stages like theology.

In the earlier phase of metaphysics, an intellectual tendency already discernible in the movement from polytheism to monotheism, is simply brought to completion. Monotheism is criticized in the same way that monotheism itself criticizes polytheism, namely, by showing that monotheism's own theories are no less vague, inconsistent, and unhelpful than those of polytheism. Reduced to its bare essentials, "God did it" is no more intellectually satisfying than "the gods did it." Initially, however, metaphysical criticism of monotheistic theories still shares with theology both the assumption that worldly events must be explained in terms of hidden forces, and that these forces are manifestations of God's power. Monotheistic speculations of how these forces operate are rejected in favor of detailed, logically coherent, naturalistic theories, but at first the metaphysical mind continues to assume that these natural forces are themselves expressive of God's agency. (Think, e.g., of Spinoza's doctrine of substance, or Leibniz's view that the world is both as logical as it can be and the best possible one.)

In the later phase of metaphysics, "Nature" tends to simply replace "God" as the entity possessing this ultimate power, although Nature continues to be understood, as God had been, as a "vague, universal bond of connection for all phenomena." On the positive side, however, this substitution completes the revolt of reason against supernaturalism. It not only naturalizes the idea of ultimate power, but it shifts the focus away from this power and toward the law-likeness of natural phenomena themselves. Even in early metaphysics, the topic of greatest theoretical interest is not God or Nature—call it what you will—but the specific "laws" that systematically explain how all the particular hidden forces actually operate. Theological systems still stress that the laws of the cosmos are the laws *of God*, and wonder why God wants things the way they are. Metaphysical systems tend to focus on the laws themselves since, cognitively speaking, it adds little to say they are laws *of Someone*.

Yet in Comte's view, it is ultimately not the substantive theories of metaphysics but what happens to the mind in developing them that matters most. To understand the "transient utility" of metaphysics is to see how its "hybrid concepts"—that is, its naturalistic ideas about hidden powers—prepare the maturing mind to concentrate exclusively on the world's phenomena themselves. Metaphysics, in its "essential instability," presents a Janus-face. Its reasoning is too independent to be theological; yet its theories are too abstract to be scientific. On the one hand and positively, metaphysical concepts differ



profoundly and positively from theological ones, insofar as they displace feelings, imagination, and appeals to authority with purely rational-logical considerations. Theology has substages, because theological reasoning is related to feelings and instincts in three different ways. Looking back on all this with a liberated metaphysical mind, feelings and instincts obviously do not qualify as an “observational” basis for theorizing. Yet at least they guaranteed for all theology a concrete, experiential relation with the world. And that, on the other hand and negatively, is precisely what is not the case with metaphysics. No metaphysical system expresses any kind of experientially distinctive relationship to worldly phenomena. In spite of its often irreverent tone, metaphysics remains at bottom a collection of naturalistic variations on theological themes—expressed, to be sure, through concepts that are “clear” and logically related, but with no empirical anchor to sustain them. In metaphysics, the abstract systems of theology simply morph into speculative and largely secular conceptual schemes.

It is this combination of intellectual irreverence and emotional-experiential remoteness that makes metaphysics interesting to Comte. For these two characteristics mark both the positive developmental significance of the metaphysical era and also its inability to ever be more than a “transitional period.” Freed from all constraints but those of reason itself, the metaphysical mind eventually becomes, we might say, too logical. Liberated reason produces both mathematics (and thus foreshadows our later love of scientific “objectivity”) and theoretical “systems of Nature” whose unsatisfactory character eventually becomes too obvious to miss. Inevitably, too many such systems are produced. For once a metaphysical theory is deemed “reasonable,” there is no satisfactory means for deciding between it and any other equally reasonable metaphysical theory. With nothing analogous to theology’s feelings or instincts or superstitious appeals to authority to hold them back, liberated metaphysical minds are able to spin out an endless stream of complete, logical, coherent . . . but also incompatible . . . conceptual schemes. During the time of its initial ascendancy, metaphysicians can rightly brag about the intrinsic educational value of being able to reason abstractly and independently while at the same time maintaining a naïve, realist faith in the representativeness of one or another favored theoretical system concerning the world’s causes and purposes. Yet later, when intellectual ties with theology grow “feeble,” the nominalistic character of all metaphysics becomes glaringly obvious. Its ideas having become “so empty through overly subtle qualification that all right-minded persons consider them to be only the abstract names of the [natural] phenomena in question” (CPP1 (1), 14 [8]).

Thus for Comte, disputes like the realism/anti-realism debates and skeptical arguments about the existence of an external world are incurably pre-scientific, i.e., metaphysical. He dismisses them in roughly the same manner as Descartes:

If popular good sense had not long ago pushed aside the absurd metaphysical doubts . . . [for example] as to so fundamental a notion as the



existence of external bodies we may be sure they would still survive in one form or another; for they have certainly never been decisively dissipated by any argument. (DEP, 11/17)

Of course, “metaphysical” doubts can never be dissipated, because they are not anchored in anything that really matters to life. How could they be? Comte does not share Kant’s view that we can dispose of the external world problem by noticing that the very possibility of inner experience makes no sense without there actually being outer objects (B274–79). Like some other philosophers later on, he is more inclined leave this matter in the hands of those (intellectual adolescents!) who like logical dilemmas. To actual people, busy discovering what the world is like and how to live in it, who cares about retracing the confused intellectual origins of such abstract and artificial puzzles, let alone cares about the puzzles themselves?

In short, says Comte, the metaphysical spirit is best regarded “as a kind of chronic distemper [*maladie chronique*] naturally inhering in our individual and collective mental evolution between infancy and manhood” (DEP, 11/17). It is the spirit of the adolescent. Of course, it is a good thing to learn to think against the influence of feelings, imagination, dogma, and appeals to authority, but a mind that is thus merely liberated can never successfully be anything more than critical. It is always “reasonable” to doubt and to argue, even in the face of “good sense,” for it is always “logically possible” that things be otherwise. Yet metaphysical minds continue to insist on this point—that is, continue to argue about the logically possible even when it is a question of explaining our natural and social relations as we actually (or might fruitfully) experience and live them. In this, such minds reveal that reason is ultimately unfit to be its own authority. A metaphysical mind succeeds only in saying yes or no, and as it becomes aware of its power to do so, it harbors the dirty little secret that it can ultimately say no even to its own affirmations. In its “obstinate proneness to argue rather than observe,” it thus remains more interested in the dissolution of theoretical claims than in “truly scientific work” (DEP, 8–10/12–15). Strictly speaking, “the metaphysical spirit properly so called . . . can never be anything but critical,” which is both its glory and ultimately its undoing.<sup>25</sup> Just as the experience of this limitation drives the stubborn and opinionated adolescent toward adulthood, it moves the disillusioned metaphysical mind spontaneously toward science.

### THE COMING SCIENTIFIC ERA: STAGE III

Given his view of how human beings *become* scientific, it is clear that Comte does not see the maturing mind’s move toward embracing the value of “observation” as a kind of Carnapian leap to positivity at the expense of theology and metaphysics. Indeed, he would regard later positivism’s



ahistorical smugness about its hegemony over theology and metaphysics as not only ignorant but destructive. A transition from pre-scientific to positive thought, says Comte, is not made by acts of “pure [intellectual] negation” (DEP, 42/68). Abstractly functioning minds love to engage in such acts; living people, however, prefer to ask how they might think better about what concerns them.

It is useful in this regard to compare Comte’s characterization of the intellectual transition to science with Taylor’s notion of “working out” alternative ways of thinking. Recall that for Taylor, working-out is not a process of simply deciding on a new scheme. Instead, it involves our developing alternatives via “historical redescriptions”—that is, new conceptualizations that (a) “articulate the unsaid in present practices,” in order to (b) “undo the forgetting” of the origins of a now problematic practice or social form. Comte’s account of the intellectual movement from one stage to another closely resembles (a) but is interestingly different from (b).

Take, for example, the emergence of the idea of technology-aided “observation” that is so crucial in the third stage.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, Comte argues that we must not think of observation itself as something completely new. Even in the earliest phases of theology, we develop a generalized awareness that at least in some of our experiences, there are obvious, “perceivable” regularities requiring no special explanation. The world and other people are usually there, where and when I see them; things usually happen in expected ways; I can usually raise my arm when I want to, and so forth. The move toward scientific thinking is at bottom just a conscious but radically chastened return to an early, “instinctively” employed savvy about our surroundings—or stated more formally, it is a deliberate and “methodological extension of universal good sense [*sagesse universelle*].”<sup>27</sup> As the mind matures, it gradually becomes aware of how much our undisciplined everyday manner of just looking around at things misses. Our normal sort of spontaneous experiential engagement is thus transformed into, not replaced by “observation” in the technical modern sense. Understanding this move as a transformation rather than a replacement keeps in play an awareness of just how and why observation is an improvement. One needs no external criterion to explain this (e.g., “it combats skepticism”). Instead the very sense of improvement will remain internal to its adoption, so that a lot more can then be said about our experiential engagements without the handicap any rigid dichotomies of naïve perception vs. genuine observation. In this respect, Comte’s account of the scientifically conceived encounter with one’s surroundings strongly resembles (a) Taylor’s idea of “historical redescriptions” as facilitating further, more penetrating articulations. “Just taking everything in” is transformed into “observation,” properly so-called.

On the other hand, Comte’s account is also unlike Taylor’s (b) in revealing way. For Taylor, working out alternative articulations is only in part concerned with redescription as such. As he presents it, the process is also crucially concerned with “undoing the *forgetting*” that is characteristic of



some inherited way of thinking and acting. A familiar practice is now experienced as deeply discomforting in a pervasive way—the way, for example, Taylor thinks we now experience epistemology with a capital “E.” There is for Taylor, then, as there is for numerous other important figures in the twentieth century (e.g., Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Rorty) a strong sense that the process of working out fresh or alternative epistemic articulations involves “overcoming” something habitual and familiar that is currently not just standing in the way but actively blocking us from moving to more intellectually and practically satisfying articulations. In other words, as it is sometimes put (albeit a bit misleadingly), there is a “therapeutic” element in twentieth-century versions of Taylor’s sort of historical redescription (or, say, of Foucault’s genealogies). Since this element plays a pervasive role in both Nietzsche and Heidegger, I return to the point in Chapters 6 and 7.

In the meantime, it is important to note that Comte does not share this de[con]structive imperative. For him, moving on to the next stage is typically as natural as moving from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood. Of course maturing is frequently hard, requires the right circumstances, involves struggle, and often renders old practices obsolete. Sometimes, as in the case of the development of the sciences of (and thus strictly naturalistic theories about) human beings, one encounters stubborn resistance from religious and metaphysical dogmatism. Yet in general, Comte sees developmental transitions on the model of conceptual improvement in the sciences themselves, where one is forever revising theories on the basis of new evidence.

To return to the phenomenon of observation, then, Comte describes its positivistic recasting as steering a middle course between the extremes of “mysticism” (something inherited, that we are outgrowing) and “empiricism” (something relatively newer that still does not fully capture the positive spirit because it remains too “negative”). Like empiricism, positivism is of course opposed to abstract speculation about hidden powers and entities. As Comte famously asserts, “All competent thinkers agree with Bacon that there can be no real knowledge except that which rests upon observed facts.” Reason’s efforts to transcend sensual experience never lead to anything but mysticism. Yet this does not mean that Comte’s positivism is either inductivist or sensationalist.<sup>28</sup> And he would certainly have agreed with William James that Humean empiricism is “not very empirical.” Again, in his developmental position he rejects theories about our encounters with our surroundings that allegedly tell us what they *MUST* be like in favor of what seem like the plain facts. Thus, contrary to long-standing opinion, Comte is just as opposed to the “[mere] empiricism” of 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Condillac (or Hume) as he is to mysticism.<sup>29</sup> The false assumption about Comte’s allegedly Humean empiricism begins early and runs through the entire development of later positivism and beyond.<sup>30</sup>

In Comte’s view, the problem with mysticism and empiricism is that both distinguish too sharply between observation (i.e., the third-stage version of



“experience”) and scientific theory (i.e., third-stage “speculation”), because each in its own way misunderstands what these are. Put otherwise, Cartesians and (“pure”) Baconians are each right in what they affirm and wrong in what they reject about third-stage experience, or observation. On the one hand, Descartes is right to stress that reason has the power to free itself from feeling, prejudice, and authority, as it already starts to do even in the second stage when it develops logic and mathematics. Yet his *Meditations* (i.e., to the extent that it is still a metaphysical work) can seduce us into believing the mind has the power to discover nature’s most fundamental laws all by itself, and believing this, we fall back into abstract, pre-scientific speculation. On the other hand, the Baconians are right that pre-scientific rationality falls hopelessly prey to various (theoretical) “idols.” Yet a purely inductive procedure—by itself and without the independent resources of reason—is little more than a “barren accumulation of unconnected facts,” a “mere” empiricism and not yet science. As the mind reaches maturity, it comes to understand that this cannot be the model for truly productive knowledge; for even in pre-scientific times, experience and reason work *together* in human affairs. Indeed, even in those times, it takes both fearsome encounters and imaginative responses for the primitive mind to solve the vicious circle of being initially without either facts to guide theory or theory to inform the gathering of facts.<sup>31</sup>

In Comtean positivism, then, it takes a reflective application of the three-stage law, not a transcendental proof to explain the relationship between sense and understanding. A maturing mind eventually becomes dissatisfied with both Cartesian and Baconian articulations of what it is going through. Genuinely scientific reasoning is not more or less but only differently dependent on experience, and not more or less but only differently speculative. “Observation” has for its “objects” everything from stars and molecules to language and social customs—in a word, anything and everything that can, albeit under ever improving technological conditions, actually be encountered. The problem with “experience” as it is understood in pre-scientific times is that it is often in fact not *just* an experience but a haphazard combination of sensual encounter plus felt, imagined, or dogmatically assumed extras. The tree really does burst into flames when lightning hits it, but that doesn’t mean the tree’s spirit is threatening us. The sun actually does rise in the East and set in the West, but that doesn’t mean it is being carried across the sky in a chariot. The shadows made by the mountains of the moon really do look like a face, but that doesn’t mean there is one. And it really does seem as if everything hangs together with everything else, but that doesn’t mean Somebody planned it or Something has this natural ordering as Its purpose.

Conversely, the problem with “experience” as it is understood in early modern times (and also by those later so-called empiricists who claim to improve on Comte by dropping his developmental story), is that it is still based more on an anti-metaphysical urge to avoid sloppy combinations of



sensual encounter and assumed extras than it is on a scientifically informed idea of what observation can actually be. No one, for example, actually encounters only redness-here-now, so that one then faces the daunting task of “inferring” that this sense data belongs to a ball. One must be trained to think this way—by ignoring what one already “observes” (in Comte’s third-stage sense) in favor of abstract theories about what sensation and perception simply **MUST** be. Comte would therefore regard Mach’s theory of sensation, as well as mid-twentieth-century sense data theory as incurably metaphysical. He likes to imagine that such purportedly scientific ideas will someday be ridiculed in plays instead of being taught in the schools.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, then, once we have struggled through the successes and failures of theology and metaphysics—and thereby learned the difference between actually encountering something and imaginatively or abstractly speculating about it—we can understand what it is like to pay greater attention *just to the experiential encounter*, before and without allowing ourselves to have a theoretical attitude toward, or draw any conclusions about it. I do not mean that Comte imagines a chronological gap between encounter and theory. The point is, as reflective attentiveness to one’s actual encounters grows, so also does our capacity to think about these encounters in more receptive, flexible, and responsive terms. Comte’s conception of mature observation includes, of course, recognition of the radically greater power given to it through technological enhancement. Yet he argues that even in a scientific era, there are occasions when simply dwelling for a while with the deep and puzzling ambiguity of a situation and engaging in the sort of spontaneous theorizing that is typical of fetishism is still the most appropriate “positive” practice. Fully mature minds will, of course, understand this advice, because they have ceased being metaphysically overeager to bring everything under a conceptual scheme as quickly as possible and can therefore appreciate that there are experimental situations that yield neither entirely reliable data nor a clearly plausible explanation.<sup>33</sup>

Once the mind understands, in a positive spirit, the value of experiential encounters as such, it also recognizes what successful theorizing about these encounters must be. From our individually and collectively having been theologians and metaphysicians, we realize that what we have always wanted is a “system of knowledge” that facilitates a predictable and livable future. Yet from the failures of our theological and metaphysical speculations, we also see that obtaining this knowledge has nothing to do with finding hidden powers behind what we observe. Instead it has to do with attentive and thorough processing of the comings and goings of what we actually encounter, on the basis of which we try to calculate what to expect from them (and things like them) in the future. Comte has all of these considerations in view when he turns to the question of scientific “method.” In other words, he thinks we must settle the general question about how to philosophize *about* science at all, before lowering our sights to the issue of how science is *done*.



## HOW “POSITIVE” INQUIRY WORKS AND WHAT IT PROMISES

Given Comte’s idea that technologically enhanced “observation” and positive “speculation” are really transformations of their pre-scientific forms, it is no surprise that his treatment of scientific methodology also differs significantly from that of later positivists. Obviously, he rejects the very idea of rational reconstruction. Since it is practicing scientists and not positive philosophers who are engaged in the process of “methodologically extending [our] universal sensibleness,” the latter cannot tell the former in advance what they must always do to get things right. Nor is Comte committed to view that observation in other sciences should approximate what it is physics; nor does he privilege mathematical models for reasoning and lab-experimental models for research; nor does he split scientific knowledge up into clearly distinguished logical and empirical components.<sup>34</sup> He rejects both abstract-universal accounts of scientific rationality—on the grounds that “logic can never be separated from [the actual practice of] science”—and also essentialist accounts of observation. Of course it is useful to study, say, how induction works in experimental physics, or classification, in biology, but general accounts of induction or classification *überhaupt* can never do more than “mark out a direction to follow.” In short, philosophy is “incompetent . . . to furnish solutions” for how scientists should conduct their research (SPP1, 518/419). Truth told, all abstractly systematic or formalized accounts of the methods of science threaten to be metaphysical—and to be so at the very moment when real scientists are struggling to understand our surroundings in a “mature” instead of theologico-ideological way.

In practice, says Comte, scientific “observation” runs the gamut from ordinary (albeit instrument-aided) perception, to experimentation, classification, and historical reconstruction, depending on the kinds of experiential encounter most suitable to the particular science, and also given the current level of maturity and specific subject matter of that science. So, for example, there is a time when a developing science can do no better than to carefully record phenomenal comings and goings in the hope that from this at least an hypothesis might be “discovered” that (in the early modern sense of synthesizing the results systematically) “confirms” the recorded pattern.<sup>35</sup> Astronomy begins to separate itself from astrology in this way.

In the earlier lessons of the *Cours*, Comte identifies three basic scientific procedural approaches, namely, the direct examination of phenomena as they “naturally present” themselves (“observation proper”), experimentation, and comparison (e.g., CPP2 (19), 7–8; CPP2 (28), 19–21). In the later lessons on social science, he identifies the “historical method” (i.e., the “comparison of the various consecutive states of humanity”) both as the “last part of the comparative method” and as a separate “fourth mode” that forms the “very basis” of social science.<sup>36</sup> Comte’s idea of a fourth mode is Mill’s model for the “inverse deductive” method. In particular, however, what is



important here is that Comte's generalizations about scientific procedure are driven by what we would call ontological (also, in the chapter on Socrates, "existential") considerations, not mathematical or logical ones.

Comte's account of the varieties of scientific observation is grounded in his understanding of the different ways in which we can actually encounter things, rather than any pre-determined idea of how we must standardize procedures across these encounters. Epistemically speaking, we can say that the sciences all share a basically "observational" approach to human affairs in a loose, non-formal sense. The scientific "method" in the properly positive sense, says Comte at the outset, is thus "already largely established" by the needs of life (CPP1 (1), 12/55). At bottom, what really "unifies" the sciences and stimulates their development are precisely these old needs of life. The search for knowledge finally takes the form it does because positive-scientific versions of observation and speculation actually promise, with respect to all our encounters, control over nature and success at social reorganization.<sup>37</sup>

To anticipate a possible objection, it is not anachronistic to depict Comte arguing about the dangers of methodological formalization a century before there were any logical positivists. He actually held, for example, that works like Mill's *System of Logic* have, at best, only "temporary" value. In their correspondence, Mill notes that Comte gives the *Logic* "high approval" but is not "indebted to it for a single idea, or influenced [by it] in the smallest particular."<sup>38</sup> He complains that Comte's descriptive and often anecdotal account of the scientific method shows that he "was not so solicitous about completeness of proof as becomes a positive philosopher" (ACP, 294). Comte, however, takes this rebuff as a complement. Sounding more like a twenty-first-century postpositivist than either Mill's colleague or the great-grandparent of Carnap and Schlick, Comte opposes in principle the very intention of works like Mill's *Logic*, when such works are understood to be setting forth (in Mill's phrase) an "organon of proof." Such projects are misconceived both theoretically, for implying that there is an "essential" set of formal-logical rules for the conduct of science, and also practically, because the very offering of such an organon threatens to straitjacket scientific activity itself.<sup>39</sup>

To see what Comte thinks is at stake here, consider the following. In the introduction to the *Logic*, Mill addresses the potential objection that just as we cannot learn to how to use our muscles by studying anatomy, we cannot learn to think scientifically by studying logic. Mill replies by rejecting both sides of the analogy. In thinking as in exercising, he argues, we must learn to distinguish those moves we ought to make from those we ought not to make.<sup>40</sup> This reply is, in its own way, perfectly sensible, but for a philosopher like Comte it misses the crucial point. Granted that, for example, weightlifters can save themselves a lot of grief by exploiting the knowledge of sports medicine and physical therapy; this knowledge can only make them healthier, not better weightlifters. Similarly, knowing the rules of



reasoning and proof cannot make a scientist good at anything except maybe those canned experiments in Physics 101. It is the idea that star athletes and good scientists become what they are by “applying theory to practice” that Comte opposes.

Of course, in depicting science as “extending and perfecting” ordinary practices, Comte does not mean scientists are simply more careful recorders of what is “phenomenally” present. Virtually from birth, we want to *explain* what we encounter; hence, science continues the perfectly normal practice of “dispens[ing] with observation as soon as phenomena permit.” In all three stages, our ultimate intellectual aim remains the same, namely, to “deduce the greatest number of results from the smallest amount of immediately given data.” Scientific explanations are better because, instead of construing our encounters in terms of common prejudice, superstition, authority, or mere logical coherence, scientists “attach” observations, at least hypothetically, to some law. Like ordinary persons do implicitly, positive scientists embrace explicitly the primary aim of all knowledge—namely, “seeing for the sake of foreseeing,” “studying what *is*, in order to infer what *will be*, in accordance with the dogma that natural laws are invariable” (DEP, 17/26; cf. CPP4 (48), 417–19).

Comte’s notion of “dogma” here is revealing. Science, he says, routinely employs a *méthode dogmatique*. At any point in a research project, a scientific theory (or set of theories) is likely to be employed *at that moment* as if it were sacrosanct—that is, as if (i) it were already complete and possessed in fully developed form by the mind, and as if (ii) it were never to need modification on the basis of further research. But of course neither (i) nor (ii) is ever really the case. There is in fact a “genuine imperfectness” to all theorizing. Science is a process, not the repeated enactment of a structure. No matter how “natural” a scheme may seem to be, it has and continues to have a genesis, and in any given instance it necessarily involves cognitive selection—that is, a kind of intellectual impounding (*renfermer*) of actual phenomena that depicts them, “if not arbitrarily, then at least somewhat artificially.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, Comte’s “descriptive” rather than “reconstructive” positivism promises to pay large dividends. For he can explain why it is methodologically acceptable in a given episode of scientific practice—but epistemologically unacceptable for philosophers reflecting on scientific practice—to “forget” the artificiality and selectivity of its speculations. When philosophers of science lose sight of the fact that all thought arises out of and constitutes a response to our encounters—or worse, when they develop justifications for doing this on purpose (e.g., by embracing scientific theories in their current or in some idealized form that they think “really” represent Nature)—they obscure the fact that the point of “seeing for the sake of foreseeing” is ultimately not theoretical. It has become common among those who want to deny being logical positivists but who oppose “Science Studies” and other versions of more radically postpositivist conceptions of scientific practice



to offer merely “deflationary” assessments of future philosophy of science, according to which all of the legitimate problems raised by critics of positivism can be assimilated into a perspective that is simply less epistemologically arrogant and more Lockean and respectful of the way “empirical research” is actually conducted in the real world.<sup>42</sup> But this sort of revisionism cannot satisfy a Comtean, not because it is insufficiently revisionist, but because it approaches science in the wrong way. Comte’s evaluation of scientific theorizing is “about” science as a human practice and about *how it articulates our worldly encounters*. It is not simply second-order science, intent on clarifying its scientific “reasoning.” To him, it makes no difference whether meta-science is done arrogantly, in terms of idealized images like Representing the Book of Nature and mathematico-logical images that compare prediction to deduction, or done more “modestly” in terms of a temporarily “dogmatic” acceptance of current conceptions of “empirical research.” Both miss the point of doing science at all.

It is from this perspective that we can see why metaphysics is ultimately a practical failure and science, a glorious success. The metaphysical ideal of universal praxis—to the that extent metaphysics has such an ideal at all—is at best (and mostly in its earlier phase) “contemplation.” At worst, it promotes an intellectualistic love of analysis, argument, unified systems, and formal rules. Inevitably, the practical result of metaphysics, which generates no universal means of convincing anyone about anything outside of logic and mathematics, is that whenever changing hearts and minds is the goal, force must replace intellect. Appeals to reason come to nothing by themselves. Very clever or completely paranoid worldviews can be “logical,” too. When we begin to see that neither theological nor metaphysical abstractions—whether theoretical or methodological—make the world any better known or human existence any more peaceful and organized, field by field, metaphysical naturalism (which can only conjecture teleologically *why* things work) is transformed into scientific naturalism (which mechanistically explains *how* things work).<sup>43</sup> The whole enterprise then organizes itself hierarchically into various disciplines—starting with mathematics, the simplest and most abstract, and ending with sociology, the most complex—but not because of some theoretical ideal or formal framework of rationality, but because studies of different natural phenomena seem to require different procedures.

Comte’s treatment of sociology confirms from still another angle his tendency to give life not epistemology the last word as well as the first. *Philosophically* speaking, he asserts, sociology (or really, what we would now call social science) constitutes the most important science, but it gets its special significance not “objectively” (e.g., from epistemic criteria of right reason or (question-beggingly) from scientific findings), but “subjectively” (i.e., from our experienced needs of feeling, social sensibility, and altruistic love). Considered by itself, the control of nature can do no more than establish necessary conditions for human flourishing. It is the understanding of social behavior that will lead ultimately to the establishment of peaceful, prosperous societies.<sup>44</sup>



In contemporary retrospect, of course, Comte's distinction between objective vs. subjective perspectives for evaluating scientific practice is deeply problematic.<sup>45</sup> In the next chapter, I argue that the issues Comte is trying to address here—for example, how natural scientific practice is to be philosophically understood in relation to other modes of human being-in-the-world—are best understood and evaluated in terms of what Dilthey later calls “the standpoint of life,” but this idea is itself only defensible once the whole Cartesian framework of inner/subjective vs. outer/objective is dismantled. For now, I only want to stress that Comte conceives his philosophical responsibilities vis à vis science as involving not only an elucidation of its procedure but a reflective defense of its social, political, and cultural (i.e., in the old-fashioned sense of “moral”) significance, and even a critical account of what “science” is (and is not). It is useful to remember that in mid-nineteenth century, philosophy “of” science was not by any means the strictly epistemic inquiry—and ultimately, the established vocational specialty—it would become by the end of the century. To be a positivist philosopher is for Comte, as it was for most philosophers who thought about science at the time, to be at once epistemologist, historian, sociologist, educational theorist, and technically informed promoter of science—and to be all of these when the distinctions themselves had not yet become Platonic cuts at the joints of life. For example, in England as early as 1838, Comte was identified as THE “metascientist” to reckon with, precisely because of the superior scope and critical depth of his vision of science, its nature, and its proper socio-political status in civilization; and it was Whewell, not the more epistemologically and less historically oriented Mill, who was identified as Comte's only substantial rival.<sup>46</sup>

In any case, when sociology has taken its rightful place in the hierarchy of the sciences, the positive/scientific knowledge provided by all the sciences together promises to form the basis of a third and final form of universal praxis—namely, a truly global technology that offers us the means both to control material nature and plan for the final phase of social reorganization.<sup>47</sup> It is not that there is something fundamentally misbegotten about metaphysics or theology. In each phase, the same goal is pursued by the best means thought to be available at the time, and only the experience of living through their failures can teach us to move on to better practices. All of our mental operations, at any stage of development, are at bottom a response to experience that is forever concerned with human flourishing and with normalizing natural and social relations.

On Comte's account, then, the standard stories about philosophy's origin are quite misleading. Unreconstructed theologians and metaphysicians tell us that philosophy originates in feelings of mystery and in intellectual wonder, respectively, and it is undoubtedly true that for a time, both motivations are indispensable stimulants to speculation. In theology, the mind is stirred by the seemingly unintelligible and mysterious to overcome the vicious circle of being initially without either theories or data and to set



all our faculties to work making sense of things. And metaphysics, once begun, ultimately succeeds in showing us the power and possibilities of genuinely free reasoning. Yet in the final analysis, both theology and metaphysics are just as much pursued for the sake of prevision and for the sake of satisfying human needs as science. Thus, science is related to modern technology as theology and metaphysics are related, respectively, to worship/ritual and contemplation—namely, as the comprehensive theoretical basis for a universal form of praxis. Theology, metaphysics, and science articulate developmental modes of existence—“ways of philosophizing,” Comte says—so that moving from one to the other is not a matter of changing one’s Mind. Without actually *living through* the first two stages and experiencing the precise nature of their intellectual and practical failures, scientists could neither be successful nor self-aware of what makes its success possible.<sup>48</sup> Of course, those who have actually lived through to the positive stage understand that they are not “by nature” either theological or metaphysical beings. Yet Comte would caution us to remember that we are also not fundamentally scientific, either. Rather, we are at bottom “practical”—in Comte’s special sense that we all begin with a generally benign understanding of our fundamental relatedness with the surroundings, and we go on to live with the expectation that this condition can be maintained or restored if properly “previsioned.”

### COMTE “BEFORE” LOGICAL POSITIVISM

My account of Comte in this chapter has been mainly expository, because (as with Socrates and Descartes earlier on) I think he still has something to say to us—but only if we stop reading him through the eyes of his successors. What most commentators miss is that history—or better, Comte’s own historicity—matters philosophically to him. We see this clearly in his employment of the three-stage law to reflect upon the determinate, scientifically promising but still theologico-metaphysical circumstances of his thinking. The law is, in other words, the basis of his “defense” of why one should become a positivist in his time, and he understands being a positivist precisely in terms of his current discomfort at already “having been” (and still to some extent tending to be) pre-positivistic. I will argue in the other half of this book that reviving interest in this dimension of Comte’s work—and doing so “after” the heyday of logical positivism—can highlight two closely related issues that figure centrally in twentieth-century continental philosophy but that are still frequently marginalized in twentieth-century analytic philosophy. There are, first, the prior and extra-epistemic responsibilities of philosophy in relation to science, and this implies, second, that philosophy has a responsibility for articulating and defending its own orientation. A brief discussion of each issue here will thus serve both to conclude



Part One and introduce the main themes for the chapters on Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

## Philosophy “and” Science

First, there is the question of philosophy’s responsibilities *vis à vis science*. I have argued that it is on this issue—and not merely in disagreements over specific topics and theories—that we find the most important difference between Comte’s treatment of science and that of later positivists. According to everyone from Mill and Mach to Reichenbach and Ayer, philosophy’s main topic is the epistemology of science (or at least epistemology beholden to science), and this is no place for something like the three-stage law. They are all, to put it quickly, Cartesians, and as I explained in Chapter 1, one consequence of this is that for them philosophy is one Big Important Thing and history, another Much Lesser Thing. From their viewpoint, all Comte’s talk about the history, cultural significance, and technological applications of science express concerns extraneous to its *philosophical* treatment. With philosophy’s task thus defined, it simply follows that Comte’s appeal to the three-stage law must either be part of some master-narrative about what science “means” (in which case it is mere metaphysical speculation), or it expresses a cluster of empirical-sociological opinions regarding actual scientific activities. In the latter case, Comte is making factual claims about real events that must be evaluated *by* science; hence, even in the unlikely event that these claims turn out to be true, they can offer no grounds for *philosophical* judgments about science. In a word, later positivists turn their internalist guns on the likes of Comte. To them, his sort of “defense” of positive philosophy can only rest on a confusion between what an “objective” reconstruction science tells us it *essentially is*, and what is either empirically claimed *by* science (e.g., theology came first) or “subjectively” believed *about* it (e.g., science will make life better).

For my purposes, it is important to stress that this more reductive positivist attitude did not begin with logical positivism, and assuming that will die with this movement’s demise leaves critiques of positivism more superficial than they are often taken to be. For if one defines “post-” positivism as merely a matter of backing away from logical positivism’s immodest epistemology and giving greater deference to “what scientists actually do,” what guarantees are there that this move will be conducted with any less immodesty? For this reason, I identify the real task of any aspiring postpositivism as one of criticizing the imperiously ahistorical and scientistic “sentiments” of later positivism, not just scuttling its dated epistemic theories. In Taylor’s terms, I am calling for . . . historical redescription.

In part, logical positivism reflects a fact about the reception of Comte’s positivism that is evident from the beginning. Even during Comte’s lifetime,



his work prompted two disparate responses. The two uneven parts of Mill's enormously influential ACP convey nicely a sense of these responses themselves and of the issues that divide them. The longer (and mostly complimentary) part of Mill's book speaks for the eventually victorious majority, including most famously Mill himself in England and Littré and Durkheim in France. This faction embraces the idea of a scientific epistemology outlined in Comte's earlier *Cours*.<sup>49</sup> The shorter second part of ACP expresses Mill's opinion of the now mostly ignored minority in a highly critical (and less accurate) account of Comte's later *Système*, whose ideas are dismissed as merely sentimental and authoritarian regressions. Of course, the minority reads the *Système* very differently. Citing Comte himself, they denounce their more epistemologically-minded rivals as "abortive positivists" and call the *Cours* just an "indispensable preamble" to the *Système*'s grand plan of "social reorganization" already outlined in Comte's earliest writings.<sup>50</sup>

In postpositivist retrospect, it may seem unsurprising that the epistemological reading of Comte ultimately prevailed but, contra Mill, here is another case where a story is worth retelling even if we know how it ends. In the middle of the nineteenth century, discourse about science was still a very wide-ranging intellectual inquiry that included not only what we call epistemic topics, but also debates about the compatibility of modern natural science with Christian theology, the importance of the lives and moral character of scientists, the history of scientific discoveries, the promises and dangers of applying scientific concepts to extra-scientific concerns, educational strategies for explaining science to various audiences—in a word, everything one might want to discuss in order to determine the nature, role, and importance of science as one (albeit one extraordinarily powerful and successful) cultural activity among others. This was a conversation that today's advocates of Science and Technology Studies are eagerly reviving—while our more "traditional" philosophers of science still dismiss all this as postmodern excess. Yet in fact, the narrower sort of philosophy of science eventually practiced by logical positivists could only come into its own after the dominant cultural status of science had been made more secure than it was in Comte's day. As Yeo points out, when Merz introduces his massive work on nineteenth-century European thought in 1896 with the assertion that "the scientific spirit" is "the main characteristic of this age" and confidently adds that it is no longer necessary for him to "define" science, he puts behind him the main concerns of all those who, earlier in the century, "regarded the definition of the aims, methods, and cultural status of natural knowledge as a crucial and difficult task."<sup>51</sup>

Comte, of course, rejects the forced option between epistemic analysis and "mere" cultural/personal accounts of science. Or better, his arguments against restricting philosophy to the former can show us how to challenge the distinction itself. As I have emphasized, logical positivists may look like they are just epistemologists, but their "sentiments" are doing a lot of silent philosophical work, especially when it comes to asserting how the



larger culture ought to regard the activity whose “essence” they are allegedly reconstructing. In this, they are taking advantage of the cumulative results of the nineteenth century when, with science properly “defined” and its successful methods extolled, philosophers finally felt justified in claiming not just epistemic expertise but wider adjudicative authority about its rightful cultural role. In these somewhat sketchy but telling lines from an early draft of his *Autobiography*, Mill saw the future. Before I read Comte’s *Cours*, he says,

I already regarded the methods of the physical sciences as the proper models for the political; but one important point in the parallelism much insisted on by M. Comte, had not before occurred to me. In mathematics and physics what is called the liberty of conscience . . . is merely nominal: though in no way restrained by law, the liberty is not exercised. . . . [I]f any one rejected what has been proved by demonstration or experiment, he would be thought to be asserting no right but the right of being a fool: those who have not studied these sciences take their conclusions on trust from those who have, and the practical world goes on incessantly applying laws of nature and conclusions of reasoning which it receives on the faith . . . of the authority of the instructed. *Hitherto it had not occurred to me that the case would be the same in the moral, social, and political branches of speculation if they were equally advanced with the physical.* . . . From this time my hopes of [“mankind’s”] improvement rested less on the reason of the multitude, than on the possibility of effecting such an improvement in the methods of political and social philosophy, as should enable all thinking and instructed persons who have no sinister interest to be so nearly of one mind on these subjects, as to carry the multitude with them by their united authority.<sup>52</sup>

As Mill’s line of argument shows, once we construe the model of reasoning in physical science as appropriate for reasoning in socio-political life as well, then the fateful step from being an epistemic analyst for the truly “instructed” to seeing oneself as the rightful adjudicator for extra- and metascientific issues is a short one. The supreme display of self-confidence among the logical positivists is Mill’s vision, lived out.

Comte himself was no stranger to supreme self-confidence, and I will come back to this point in a moment. First, however, it is important to see that from his perspective, Mill’s account of the wider authority of philosophy depends on the wrong model, located in the wrong place. In his correspondence with Mill, Comte denies that the methods of the physical sciences deserve their special pride of place awarded to it in Mill’s “organon of proof”—not even with respect to the other sciences, let alone when it comes to determining the application of scientific theories to everyday life. Overextending natural scientific epistemology is bad enough, but for Comte, worse still is Mill’s



essentially “metaphysical” way of promoting it. For when Mill banishes what he calls all “outlying” historical issues from his “correct analysis of reasoning,” or when, say, Reichenbach vows to “look through” the outdated “superstructure of mists and wishes” lying “above” ongoing scientific research so that he can discern the latter’s “supporting structure”<sup>53</sup>—that is, when later positivists follow Mill in restricting themselves to analyzing scientific rationality “in itself” and in its alleged “essence”—they act as if their epistemic authority also makes them experts about life itself. But of course, it does no such thing. Moreover, it is not really their epistemological focus that makes them such confident cultural authorities. Rather, it is their embrace of the “positive spirit” that was developing along with and expressing the rising fortunes of science throughout the nineteenth century. Their “sentiments” concerning the status and importance of science in the larger culture are simply the story of Comte’s three-stage law, unacknowledged and driven underground. They constitute, as I called it in Chapters 2 and 3, the *vital understanding* of positivism.

Comte himself, of course, was no witness to these later developments, but given his reaction to Mill, it is not hard to discern what his reaction to them would have been. He would have regarded his progeny as both irresponsible (because they shirk positivism’s duty to defend itself) and ultimately self-deceived (for “no idea can be understood apart from its history”—even the allegedly “purely rational” and reconstructive project of logical positivism). There is some irony in the fact that formal accounts of scientific method promoted by later positivists are clearly “metaphysical” in Comte’s sense of the term. For him, no real-life phenomenon answers to the name, “scientific reasoning *as such*,” and there is no such thing as a contextless, rationally reconstructing mind separating the “slag” of cultural affairs from “reality” of scientific procedure.

Regarding philosophy’s responsibilities *vis à vis science*, then, Comte sees this very differently from later positivists. For them, genuine knowledge comes from science, and the culture should therefore be “instructed” to become as science-minded as possible. For Comte, the task of positive philosophy is to spell out how and why scientific minds should *now* be developing *within* culture, and for him, this task can no more be based on a prior conception of scientific epistemology than theology and metaphysics are based on preconceived theological or metaphysical “methods.” His treatment of the science-culture question expresses his understanding of a human nature that develops “through” theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages but “is” not theologically, metaphysically, or scientifically “rational” in some abstractly definable sense. Indeed, we should not even say that Comte has separate opinions about science “and” culture—as if these were two human activities in need of co-ordination. For Comte, the problem is how to develop both science and cultural activities for the sake of flourishing human lives, where “human life” is already understood in terms of the desire for regularized encounters with nature and peacefully



functioning social organization. And this problem, Comte insists, must be handled by an appropriately framed *but also reflectively defended* “positive” philosophizing.

### Philosophizing “about” Science

This, then, brings us to the second issue, namely, Comte’s very different, historically-minded conception of *philosophy’s proper self-understanding*. Today, Comte is typically construed anachronistically, as just a somewhat more candid true believer—one who knows, as Habermas puts it, that “the real job . . . of positivism . . . [is] to justif[y] the sciences’ scientistic belief in themselves by construing the history of the species as the history of the realization of the positive spirit.”<sup>54</sup> But this PR conception of positivism—though it does capture something of the spirit of the self-reports of later positivists—is un-Comtean in two ways. It mistakenly assumes that Comte (like Mill) thought of his era as *already in* the third stage, so that positivistic epistemology merely codifies an extant condition, and it implies that Comte (again, like Mill) thought there could *actually be* a universal/ahistorical organon of proof. Both assumptions are false. Comte understands himself, using the language of his time, to be analyzing scientific practice as a philosophical “stage” in life—not just in terms of the “static” structure of its proper theorizing, but “dynamically,” as the sort of human activity that it is *coming to be* in the determinate socio-historical conditions then being lived through.<sup>55</sup>

Here we see clearly the effect of Comte’s three-stage law on his own self-understanding. In his view no philosophy, not even positivism, succeeds in placing itself after or beyond its inheritance; hence, not even a fully “mature” philosophy can establish the “essence” of anything, once and for all, in abstraction from its surroundings and inheritance. We philosophers, says Comte, “always labor for our descendants, but under the impetus of our ancestors, from whom we derive both the materials with which and the processes by which we work” (SPP4, 34/31, translation altered). What this means, we might say, is that Comte is concerned with *being* a positivist, not just behaving like one. This is not his turn of phrase, but it is certainly Comte’s view. For him, the basic function of the three-stage law is to *take the measure of his own (and presumably our own?) inherited outlook*. Discussions of his law appear everywhere in his writings, precisely because they constitute a running, reflective articulation of his vital understanding—his defense of *becoming* a positivist and thus “being” what the times require of a philosopher.

Only in terms of this defended orientation does Comte think either scientific practice itself or its significance for the larger concerns of life can be properly evaluated philosophically. For him, scientific understanding is the mark of intellectual “maturity” because its kind of comprehension of the natural and social world makes possible a technology that really works—that is, gives us what we have always really wanted. His defense



of this practical technoscientific dream is no sentiment; it is his explicit, candid, and reflective philosophical response to the “burden” of his history. In contrast with the later positivists we more directly—and now, unhappily—inheriting, Comte tries (as one now says) to “contextualize” current philosophizing about science. Here, I think, is a positivist worth reconsidering “after” positivism—all the more so because we still share his technoscientific sense of things, but no longer with our whole hearts.<sup>56</sup> However, if all of this makes Comte worth reconsidering, it is now time to consider why we cannot become Comteans.

## NOTES

1. See Robert C. Scharff, *Comte After Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2002).
2. Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn, “The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle,” in *Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. M. Neurath and R. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), 1–20. For discussion, see the “Introduction” to the French translation by Antonia Soulez, in *Manifeste du cercle de Vienne et autres écrits* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).
3. John Passmore, “Logical Empiricism,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 5, 56. This was, of course, not true even for many of those who believed it. (Note: Regarding “logical positivism” and “logical empiricism,” current writers seem to use them interchangeably. In the 1930s, leading representatives of the movement began to prefer “logical empiricism” because it seemed to stress their commitment to scientific methodology over than their opposition to traditional metaphysics. But whatever may be necessary for more detailed historical works, I will treat them as synonyms, mostly use “logical positivism” myself, and make no effort to correct or explain their use in quotes and citations.)
4. As Richard Creath points out, Passmore’s obituary for logical empiricism focuses primarily on the rejection of its specific doctrines. About its “spirit” also being dead, Creath enlists the help of Mark Twain to suggest the judgment is premature (“Logical Empiricism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Spring 2013 edition], ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/logical-empiricism/>).
5. I am thinking especially of Neurath’s later writings, which Uebel rightly insists are anti-formalist (even anti-foundationalist and epistemologically naturalist in a certain sense), but for this reason alone is willing to describe as “post-positivist.” See Thomas E. Uebel, “The Enlightenment Ambition of Epistemic Utopianism: Otto Neurath’s Theory of Science in Historical Perspective,” in *Origins of Logical Empiricism: Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 16, ed. Ronald N. Giere and Alan W. Richardson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 91–112. But would the later Neurath be willing to abandon, say, the *Tractatus*’ idea that all talk of “necessity,” no matter what the topic, should be understood as *logical* necessity? If not, then no matter what scientists say about, e.g., “causality” in relation to the phenomena in their discipline, Neurath still already knows better.
6. So, e.g., John O’Neill is right to stress the importance of Otto Neurath’s socialism against the Frankfurt School’s assumption that “positivism is a conservative doctrine necessarily committed to existing social institutions



and to a technocratic conception of politics” (“In Partial Praise of a Positivist: The Work of Otto Neurath,” *Radical Philosophy* 74 [2005]: 31). In this way, however, O’Neill misses the same point as the critical theorists. Positivism, by its own self-description, cannot be a politically engaged doctrine of any kind, because political claims articulate sentiments not truth. It is this internalist self-portrait I am arguing is mistaken. (Of course today we might ask if “social engineering,” when advocated by socialists, is really in principle any more democratic than when it is promoted by right-wing technocrats.)

7. “The Scientific Conception of the World,” 20. In fact, the members of the Vienna Circle did not all share the same specifically political and social opinions, and among those who emigrated to the United States, such opinions as they had were frequently altered to accommodate the Cold War atmosphere in which they suddenly found themselves. See, e.g., George A. Reisch, “From ‘the Life of the Present’ to the ‘Icy Slopes of Logic’: Logical Empiricism, the Unity of Science Movement, and the Cold War,” in *Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism*, ed. Alan Richardson and Thomas Uebel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–87.
8. Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. Rolf A. George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), xvii–xviii, my emphasis.
9. Hilary Putnam, “Philosophers and Human Understanding,” in *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 204.
10. “Beyond Historicism,” *Realism and Reason*, 303–04.
11. “Tracing the scientific and philosophical developments of the previous two hundred years as well as his battles against the scientists of his day, the *Cours* essentially recapitulated Comte’s own education and reinforced it by bringing all the strands of his thought together. . . . [I]t was the story of his learning process—a process that he wanted everyone to share” (Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2009, 2009; hereafter PIC and the volume], PIC 1:699).
12. It is useful to remember that Nagel is ultimately not an opponent of this orientation, but rather someone whose “sympathies are with Descartes and Frege.” Hence, he conceives his efforts to find room for the first- rather than third-person reports as giving them merely limited value and distinctively secondary status. First person reports are useful, e.g., in reminding us that reason’s quest for “unqualified results” is nevertheless “something *we do*.” In other words, Nagel retains the older objectivist assumption that scientific knowledge gets the “last word” against “subjectivistic” misinterpretations of the process of obtaining this knowledge. See, e.g., Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6–7, and ch. 1.
13. See, e.g., Richard Creath, “Vienna, the City of Quine’s Dreams,” in *Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism*, ed. Alan Richardson and Thomas Uebel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 332–45.
14. Below I approach Comte primarily through the epistemically oriented and scientifically interested arguments he lays out in the *Cours*, and I relate these primarily to recent work in the Anglo-American tradition. For another approach, see Andrew Wernick’s study, which begins with Comte’s later conception of a secular “Religion of Humanity” (developed above all in *Système de politique positive*) and relates it especially to recent work in the French and German traditions. See *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The influence of positivism on law and the human sciences in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with special emphasis



- on Comte, is discussed by Michael Singer, *The Legacy of Positivism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
15. On problems with this view, see my entry, "Technology as 'Applied Science,'" in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen, Stig Andur Pedersen, and Vincent F. Hendricks (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 160–66.
  16. Citations from the *Discours [préliminaire] sur l'esprit positif* (Paris: Carilian-Goeury and Victor Dalmont, 1844), hereafter, DEP [*A Discourse on the Positive Spirit* (London: William Reeves, 1903)]; and *Système de politique positive, ou traité de sociologie, instituant la religion de l'humanité*, 4 vols. (Paris: L. Mathias, 1851–54), hereafter SPP [*System of Positive Polity*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1875–77), SPP4a, 77/547]. See also PIC 1:693–98; Wernick, 36–49.
  17. Singer, e.g., by ignoring the sixth and seventh meanings, overstates Comte's view of the power of social scientific laws—claiming they tell us what is "bound to occur," thus redefining the idea of social reorganization in "prescriptive" direction that Comte would have found metaphysical (*Legacy of Positivism*, 9–10, 32–35). In general, later positivists tend to reduce "positivity" to Humean redefinitions of Comte's first five meanings—of course, without any explanation for doing so.
  18. For a more detailed account, see my *Comte after Positivism*, 73–91; and "Comte, Philosophy, and the Question of Its History," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 184–99. In order to focus on the general themes of the sort of historically determinate circumstances Comte thinks he is living through and tries to articulate in terms of his law, I ignore the considerable work of a more fine-grained nature that Comte did in order to explain, e.g., the unexpected delay in the development of the sort of culture and industry that one would expect to see, given the already extensive successes of at least the physical sciences (see Wernick, 90ff).
  19. *Cours de philosophie positive* (hereafter, for the first two "lessons," CPP, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988]), 1, nos. 1–2; translation of other lessons mine.
  20. Singer rejects my giving Comte's conception of *état* a developmental sense, arguing that the word, then and now, conveys a primarily static rather than developmental sense (*The Legacy of Positivism*, 146 n. 23). My point, however, is not about the common meaning of the word, or what Comte might have actually said about selecting it, but about how to depict the sense of the view he works out, often without making reflective comments. I ask, what does the view "amount to," i.e., what understanding of the move from pre-scientific to scientific thinking does Comte convey? This is, of course, what is now called a hermeneutical reading of Comte (a notion treat explicitly in my chapters on Dilthey and Heidegger). In the present case, it is clear from many of Comte's descriptions that he prefers accounting for developmental change by focusing on *how the transition from one to the other transforms one's thinking*. He has not yet accepted the exclusively deductive-nomological model of explanation that came later and would have required him to suppress any talk of how the experienced transition might be lived through. In fact, he would have regarded this model with suspicion, in part because of his opposition to "causal" talk of any sort, and in part because on the issue of becoming a scientific thinker, he is less concerned with giving a structural-analytical account of the conditions under which it happens and more concerned with giving a philosophical account of what this development allows us to understand about how we "come to be" thinkers of a truly scientific sort. Singer misses the same point in the same way when he rejects my claim



that Comte understands science as “transforming” metaphysics and theology rather than “superseding” it. He complains that I don’t provide a quotation where Comte actually says this (147 n. 24). Ideas superseding each other is how one sees Comte’s philosophy when observing it from the *outside*; transformation is what one understands about his thought when one interprets it *immanently*.

21. “Prevision” conveys Comte’s meaning better than the more rigorous and historically loaded “prediction,” precisely because to him “it meant not only going from the present to the future, but from the known to the unknown” more generally (Pickering, PIC 1:566). Thus, with respect to the three-stage law, when we understand how scientific theories serve our deepest interests better than theological or metaphysical ones, this stimulates us to *look toward making subsequent accounts for our encounters* with our surroundings (i.e., “foreseeing” them)—whether past, present, or future—in scientific rather than theological or metaphysical terms.
22. CPP1, 63/38; SPP1, 1–7, 321, 701–705/1–5, 257, 566–70. See also DEP, 45/72. In 1889, “*Ordem e Progresso*” was incorporated into Brazil’s national flag by an intelligentsia strongly influenced by Comte’s social theory (Pickering, PIC 2:288–89). As mentioned above, in the *Système*, Comte goes still further, adding a third idea to the slogan. From the improvement of our natural and interpersonal circumstances, there will eventually arise a similar improvement in our affective life, and self-centeredness will begin to give way to universal and benevolent love—because, Comte explains, although “we grow tired of thinking, and even of acting; we never tire of loving” (SPP1, 1/1).
23. It is therefore misleading for Singer to call the evolution of the sciences “the second of the two ideas on which Comte built the philosophical structure of positivism” (*Legacy of Positivism*, 15). Comte treats this second idea in the same subordinate way that he does the ideas of individual cognitive development and socio-political change, viz., as expressions from still another angle of the content of the three-stage law itself. The point is important because, as I argue below Comte’s praise of science is not the expression of a separate and basic commitment to Reason, as with some defenders of the Enlightenment, but is entirely dependent upon his deeper sense of what scientific thinking helps bring about.
24. Comte obviously does not see religious faith/experience, as such, as playing a central role in the Western tradition. He does, however, admire the act of believing faith for its felt intensity, its preoccupation with the concrete and experiential, and for its way of informing the whole of one’s life. For these reasons, he admires fetishism above any other theological outlook. Indeed, the spirit of fetishism is as central to his conception of positivist culture as of the positive spirit. As Juliette Grange rightly notes, the grand subjective synthesis of reason and feeling toward which our age aspires is rightly called a “new fetishism” (*La philosophie d’Auguste Comte: Science, politique, religion* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996], 17–19). No amount of scientific progress will ever produce an “objective” or absolute synthesis, either of the natural or social order. Hence, our sense of the unity of nature and social harmony will always be only “subjective” or “fictional”; and it is in fetishism that we find the purest expression of both the struggle to “subordinate the subjective to the objective”—*and* the recognition of the “fundamental preponderance of the heart over the intellect” which mature positivism is finally in a position to appreciate fully (SPP3, 82–122/68–101, quoted from 121/100 and 120/99).
25. DEP, 42/68. John Stuart Mill, who tends to focus in his own writings on the unscientific character of metaphysical theories, claims that the “dialectics



and negative criticism” necessary for a rationality freed from authority and superstition are features of scientific, not metaphysical thinking. He thus takes Comte to task for giving metaphysics too much credit. See ACP and *Three Essays on Religion, Collected Works: Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, vol. 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 278 and 404, respectively. In this, Mill foreshadows the later positivist tendency to collapse the distinction between theology and metaphysics, simply relegating them both to the pre-scientific past. One consequence of this is, of course, that the only sort of reason that seems to really deserve the name is then simply *defined* as the cognitive/calculative rationality one utilizes in mathematics and the empirical sciences. Why this should even seem to us to be a plausible idea is never asked. One’s own earlier experiences of metaphysical thinking are thus suppressed, only to re-emerge in the form of a free-floating urge to be “skeptical” that still haunts even postpositivist epistemologies.

26. Comte was well aware that many of the technologies used by the early modern scientists had already been invented—largely by people who did not know and would not have cared about their possible scientific employment. Unfortunately, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, after seventy-five years of logical positivism’s influence on our philosophizing about science, we need historians of technology to remind us of this fact. See, e.g., Thomas P. Hughes, *The Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
27. DEP, 44–45/71–72, 86/135. In one place, Comte even calls the turn toward observation by disillusioned metaphysicians a “radicalization of fetishism” (SPP4, 204/180).
28. Comte does seem to accept a kind of proto-Popperian mythology about Bacon as a “pure” empiricist who believed that, in Lakatos’ famous quip, “a discovery is scientific only if it is guided by facts and not misguided by theories” (Imre Lakatos, “Popper on Demarcation and Induction,” in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp [LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974], 259). Still, Comte’s epistemic “middle way” accords nicely—though with a more strictly epistemological focus—with Bacon’s actual view of scientists as mediating between “empirics” and “philosophers,” whom he likens respectively to ants and spiders and then contrasts with scientific bees who not only collect material but produce honey by means of it.
29. The slogan about Bacon and observation appears most famously in CPP1 (1), 8, 34/4, 20. For the Condillac remark, see, e.g., CPP3 (43), 626–27.
30. See, e.g., Carnap, “Testability and Meaning,” *Philosophy of Science* 3 (1936): 420; Roy Wood Sellars, “Positivism in Contemporary Philosophic Thought,” *American Sociological Review* 4 (1939): 26–27; and C.S. Peirce, “Critique of Positivism,” *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 126–27. Peirce also appears to be the source of Jürgen Habermas’ perpetuation of this mistake into German postpositivism in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 74–75. Comte, I think, would have approved with some amusement of Merleau-Ponty’s famous discussion of Schneider in *Phenomenology of Perception* (e.g., 105–40). Poor Schneider does indeed have to “synthesize” sensations and concepts in order to obtain knowledge of his surroundings . . . because he suffered serious brain damage in World War I. Comte would have missed, however, the conception of human embodiment that Merleau-Ponty is arguing underlies the dichotomy itself—which is generated by intellectualist or transcendental accounts that are “less false than abstract” (126).



31. Scientific theorizing, then, falls between the extremes of “total generality” and “perfect reality”—in this way modeling “that happy combination in our ordinary affairs of dogmatism and empiricism, which in isolation are each equally incompetent, the former from its susceptibility to illusion, the latter from its lack of foresight” (SPP1, 427/346). Or, alternatively, we might say that for Comte, understanding the way sense and reason function together requires a better grasp of how this happens in life itself, not the elaborate epistemological machinery of “reconstructive” analysis. He thus “solves” the problem of synthesis, without writing a *Critique of Pure Reason*.
32. Most famously, he feels this way about the pseudo-scientific theories of so-called “interior observation” advocated by contemporaries like Victor Cousin and Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard. For discussion (together with cautionary notes against confusing his critique with a denial that we can introspect), see my *Comte after Positivism*, 24–44.
33. SPP3, 82–3/68–69; sociology in its present and much more obviously transitional condition is cited as an obvious case in point (CPP4 (48), 412–21).
34. As Michael Friedman persuasively argues, neither the verificationist nor formalist characterizations of logical positivism are entirely accurate, mainly because the empirical-logical/content-form dichotomy is not nearly as prominent in the pre-1930 writings of logical positivists themselves as in many subsequent accounts of them (*Reconsidering Logical Positivism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 18–25). Nevertheless, if it is not prominent, the distinction is explicitly recognized as something to address. It is thus important for my purposes to explain why Comte’s own positivism is best conceived as if this dichotomy had not yet been developed in the way that it was in English-speaking circles after Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, so that a certain (if I may say so without being accused of some presentism of my own) phenomenological cast of his account is not missed.
35. On the early modern sense of confirmation/discovery, see Larry Laudan, “Why Was the Logic of Discovery Abandoned?” in *Science and Hypothesis: Historical Essays on Scientific Methodology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1981), 181–91.
36. CPP4 (48), 449–68. Also, John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Collected Works*, vols. 7 and 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973–74), VI, x, pars. 4–8. For Comte on observation, with extensive references, see my *Comte after Positivism*, 30–34.
37. Comte calls this ultimately more important unity “subjective,” but he does not mean this in the later positivistic sense of the “merely” first-person and thus rationally inconsequential.
38. ACP, 293 n. The French and English sources of the Comte-Mill correspondence have a complicated publishing history, and the one complete French collection, *Lettres inédites de John Stuart Mill à Auguste Comte avec les réponses de Comte*, ed. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Paris: Alcan, 1899), is hard to find. I cite here only the English collection, edited and translated by Oscar A. Haac, *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).
39. Histories of logical positivism usually start with the early twentieth century. In Friedman’s *Reconsidering Logical Positivism*, e.g., Mill gets one mention and Comte, none. I discuss Comte’s remarkably prescient anti-formalism in “Comte and the Possibility of a Hermeneutics of Science,” in *Hermeneutic Philosophy of Science, Van Gogh’s Eyes, and God: Essays in Honor of Patrick A. Heelan, S.J.*, ed. Babette Babich (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 117–26.
40. SL, Intro., 7. According to the editors, the analogy originates with Thomas Carlyle.



41. See, e.g., CPP1 (2), 78/46. On the dogmatic method, see *Comte after Positivism*, 100–105.
42. See John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2–3, 14, 275. Comte's epistemology of science, we might say, can in principle be regarded as resistant to metaphysical representationalism.
43. In this regard, because so much of the current philosophical talk about naturalism depends upon dated images of science and scientific procedure—images that owe more to the dogmas of logical positivism than to socio-historical information about the science currently and successfully practiced—today's so-called naturalism has in fact become metaphysical. See, e.g., Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
44. Cf. Juliette Grange, *La philosophie d'Auguste Comte*, 267–332; Pickering, PIC3, 167–83; and Wernick, 27–36. Comte's lifelong “subjective” (i.e., ethico-political) interest in fostering the establishment of sociology is only one of several indications that his conception of the hierarchy of the sciences is not reductivist, in the manner of logical positivism. See Peter T. Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 60–62.
45. I ignore here the most problematic character of Comte's vision of what the social world will look like in a fully realized third stage, which he pictures as one in which industrialism and the Religion of Humanity are perfected (see esp., SPP 4). The most judicious evaluations of this matter I know are Pickering, PIC 3:312–85, and Wernick, esp. ch. 5.
46. See Richard Yeo, *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge, and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), who reports that although Whewell himself did not specifically respond to Comte until the end of his life, David Brewster (in his 1838 review of Comte's *Cours*) called the two figures the only two important contemporary “legislators of science,” and he designated Comte as the obviously more prestigious (232–35). Yeo's use of the term “metascience” is misleading, given its later and narrower epistemic usage, but he makes the important point that Comte's advocacy of a scientific culture is driven by an understanding of human flourishing that is not itself scientistic. Ernst Cassirer is mistaken, I think, to interpret this feature of Comte's positivism as expressing a “classical, rationalistic ideal” that originates with Descartes, and to call Comte “perhaps the last thinker to grasp the problem of philosophy and the general theory of knowledge in its universal extent” (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968], 9). This backward-looking interpretation makes Comte's position too much an echo of the metaphysical era and too little the projection of the positive-age-in-the-making he takes it to be.
47. I focus here, as does Comte himself, on what we might call the intellectually “revolutionary” character of this transition; but we should remember that there is another sense in which the move to science from theology and metaphysics—as a move that involves the mathematization of nature—was already a prominent medieval idea. See Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
48. Compare, e.g., Heidegger's account of ancient philosophical wonder in GA 45:177–90/153–64. His main thesis is that wonder is not a subjective state but a mode of existence, a way in which we are “disposed” toward whatever is disclosed to us that gives rise to *techné* as the “carrying out of the necessity and need of wonder” (180/155).



49. In addition to the two introductory Lessons of CPP1 (1–2) and Mill’s ACP, 265/4–5, 328–32/125–32, see Émile Littré, *Auguste Comte et la philosophie positive* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1863), i–xi, 518–19, 662–68; and “Comte et Mill,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* 36 (1866): 829–66; Émile Durkheim, *Le Socialisme. Sa définition-ses débuts la doctrine Saint-Simonienne* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1928) (*Socialism and Saint-Simon* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959]), ch. 1. See also W.M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 14–24.
50. SPP1, 1–10/ix–xvii; SPP4, 546–49/473–75; and SPP4a, i–ii/i–ii. See also J.H. Bridges, *The Unity of Comte’s Life and Doctrine: A Reply to Strictures on Comte’s Later Writings Addressed to J.S. Mill* (London: Trübner, 1866); and T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The view that Comte’s writings in fact form a unified vision is now probably the majority view. Among the earliest English-language sources is Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 10–13. Among philosophers of science, however, the old mythology of Comte as already at least epistemically aligned with twentieth-century positivists is still alive and well. See, e.g., Zammito, *Derangement of Epistemes*, 8. Yet only recently has the unity view (which is clearly Comte’s own) come to be documented in a systematic way. See esp. Pickering, PIC 1:3–5, 691–98, and PIC 3:159–67. The special virtue of Wernick’s study is that it stresses precisely the social and religious elements of the “losing side” of Comte’s position and considers their contemporary significance (14–21); see also PIC 3:601–7. What I urge here, however, is that more attention be paid to the question of how it could have been possible in the first place for so many others to perceive two quite separable “sides” of Comte’s thought where he did not.
51. Yeo, *Defining Science*, 28. Yeo’s focus is Victorian England, but he is clear that this is one perspective on a wider, “European” phenomenon. Moreover, as Wernick emphasizes, the failure of Comte’s utopian social project, the scholarly neglect, and his current relative obscurity do not, in fact, mean that Comte’s influence was/is minimal (5–20). Indeed, that is part of my thesis: History matters to philosophy . . . all the more powerfully when one is in denial about it.
52. *Autobiography, Collected Works*, vol. 1, 615–16, my emphasis. Mill was serious about this way of relating science and politics. In the *Logic*, he calls ethics a philosophy of action that is designed as an “art” dependent on and coordinated with his philosophy of science. Moreover, the Principle of Utility is characterized as filling the same role in ethics that the Causal Law does in science. See, Alan Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 2nd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1990), 187–96; and John M. Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind: The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 160–81. In a still earlier draft of his *Autobiography*, Mill pictures the two-tier education system the future as one in which “the more the intelligence of *the multitude* became improved, the more they would appreciate the greater knowledge and more exercised judgment of *the instructed* and the more disposed they would be to defer to their opinion” (615 n., my emphasis). In the presence of technoscientific expertise, the multitude should think twice about exercising their “liberty of conscience.”
53. *Experience and Prediction*, 403–4. In Carnap’s similar phrasing, we must ignore the “subjective origins” of knowledge in order to develop a “constructional



system . . . identical for all observers” (*Logical Structure*, 7). In an unpublished letter to Carnap (May 9, 1936), Neurath praises Comte for promoting the methodological unity of the sciences but condemns his “metaphysics” for giving the very term “positivism” a bad name (cited in Rudolf Haller, “Was Wittgenstein a Positivist?” *Questions on Wittgenstein* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988], 34–35).

54. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 72.
55. For a sample of recent sorts of postpositivist philosophies of science that all converge on the idea of science as a human practice, e. g., Joseph Rouse, “Philosophy Of Science and Science Studies in the West: An Unrecognized Convergence,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society* 5, no. 1 (2011): 11–26, and “Two Concepts of Scientific Practices,” in *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 161–83; also the collections, *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997); *Science as Practice and Culture*, ed. Andrew Pickering (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, and Culture*, ed. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, Richard Shusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
56. I develop this point in “Comte and Heidegger on the Historicity of Science,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 52, no. 1 (1998): 29–49; and “On Philosophy’s ‘Ending’ in Technoscience: Heidegger vs. Comte,” in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition—An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), 318–28.



## Part II Introduction

# Comte Inherited but Not Surpassed: The Problem of Historicity

In one sentence, if his reflective self-honesty makes Comte's positivism seem more attractive today than the positivism of his successors, neither the technoscientific vision at which he arrives nor the tone of voice he often uses to promote it are nearly as attractive. In the end, Comte's substantive views are not so different from those of later positivism. He merely thinks it is wrong to be silent about them, and he would certainly object to calling them philosophically irrelevant "sentiments." For all his differences about how to conduct epistemology, Comte does believe that scientific thinking is superior to theological and metaphysical thinking, and he does not see any other options. Moreover, his primary motivation for cultivating philosophical self-awareness is not the general and so to speak "Socratic" conviction that such self-awareness is every philosopher's duty. Instead, his motive is to defend an explicitly positivistic articulation of what he thinks we are at least beginning to get right.

It is thus not surprising that the side of Comte I attempt to retrieve in Chapter 4 has mostly gone unappreciated. There is another, more prominent side, and much in his writings that is all too familiar. In numerous passages throughout his writings, we find him speaking in imperial tones that are just as "Carnapian" as any logical empiricist's. And he often speaks as if from a vantage point just as far beyond life—and beyond any need for further reflection on this—as that of any later positivist. Sometimes he implies that cultivating a reflective, historically contextualized outlook is something temporary, and anticipates a "complete emancipation from the past" and to establishing something like "a first philosophy such as Bacon sought . . . [that] is destined henceforth to serve both as the permanent basis for all human speculations" and the "spiritual foundation" of all social order "so long as the human race endures."<sup>1</sup>

In short, there are in Comte two treatments of third-stage thinking. One originates in his own self-understanding, depicts its orientation in a historically contextualized way, and subjects this orientation to a defense. The other, more akin to that of later positivism, simply employs this orientation as if it were context-free and already justified. In fact, however, I do



not regard the existence of the latter treatment—even if it ultimately dominates Comte’s writings and our memory of him—as an embarrassment to my analysis. My reasoning here is the same as with Descartes in Chapter 3. Far from weakening my brief for his contemporary relevance, it is the presence of a tension in Comte’s writings—more specifically, this tension as something he does not acknowledge but that nevertheless prompts him to face away from precisely the things I believe make him relevant again *after* positivism—that makes him worth rethinking.

To see why, consider the following question. If Comte is really serious about explaining why he must be a positivist, how does it happen that he so frequently regards it as already justified?<sup>2</sup> How could Comte, in philosophizing about the sciences, consider the same cluster of epistemic and social concerns in two such different ways—that is, sometimes historico-critically, yet more often imperiously—and *not even notice, let alone try to resolve, the conflict between the two*? The answer, I think, lies in a feature of his way of understanding the third stage I have not yet discussed—a feature that brings us to Dilthey and Nietzsche.

As we have seen, that a positive philosopher is a “mature” philosopher seems to Comte to be an issue already settled by the fact that science and its technologies constitute a *culminating occurrence*—that is, a successful resolution, at least in principle and to the extent it is possible, of all the insoluble problems of the earlier stages. Even the Big Questions that initially overstimulate our minds are most satisfactorily conceived in retrospect as deserving responses of awe, wonder, a sense of mystery, and good literature—not a search for pseudo-theoretical answers, since there is no hope of such answers ever applying to anything observable. With the Big Questions properly appreciated and the quest for knowledge confined to the comings and goings of the observable world, the payoff is obvious. The third stage is an *ending* that cannot and need not ever *end*. We finally understand that real knowledge is only “relative” to whatever evidence we have obtained from whatever observations we have recorded and theorized thus far.<sup>3</sup> Lacking a Divine Perspective from which everything could be observed completely and simultaneously, we see that our knowledge can never be “absolutely” guaranteed by the a priori authority of feeling, superstition, faith, or even reason, and realizing this leaves us with the benefit of always being prepared to handle new disruptions to the natural and social order with more observation, modified theories, and subsequently altered practices.

In today’s retrospect, however, there is something strikingly missing from this story. Comte does not just refuse to think past the age of science; he never entertains the thought at all. He never asks, Could there be a fourth stage? and then answers no. He just never considers anything like “after the third stage,” even as a purely logical possibility. And there is, I think, a very good reason for this. Put simply, Comte has no cause to conceive such a possibility. If the point of self-understanding is to articulate the life one finds oneself living through, and the mature mind must be responsive to



“observation,” there is nothing for Comte to “observe” that seems to fall outside the pattern of explanation set up by the three-stage law. He speaks out of a context of vital understanding and at a time when technoscience is still more promise than actualization, and when pre-scientific thinking is still seen more as ill-fated and ineffectual than cognitively meaningless. It is not that Comte is theoretically or socio-politically committed to thinking “dogmatically” in terms of three stages and no more. For him—as we can see also in the case of Socrates and Descartes—actual philosophizing happens within the living of life not from above it, no matter what story one tells oneself; hence, what Comte is carefully conceptualizing is the *arrival* of the third stage, laid out entirely in terms of his experienced sense of it. In the “culminating” form of this arrival as he thus works it out, there simply *is* no fourth stage. Put in later language, Comte has no factual/experiential motivation to think beyond an internalist vision of the third stage. It is just as impossible intellectually as it is physically to jump off one’s own shadow.

Philosophically speaking, then, the outlook we should attribute to him is something like this. From “within” the context of Comte’s experience and thus “for” his honest self-reflection, the third stage is what life predominantly promises to *be*—ontologically, epistemologically, and practically.<sup>4</sup> For him, positive reasoning is *actually becoming* the successful and comprehensive cognitive response to a general understanding of reality (i.e., that the world is mostly benign, predictable, and thus at least restorable to a basically accommodating condition) which originates in primitive life. Comte understands the move from a theological or metaphysical to a scientific way of thinking as a responsiveness to what Heidegger calls an eventuation (*Ereignis*), not a one-time event. For Comte, when practice is guided by a scientific rather than a theological or metaphysical articulation of our experience, life can really *be* what it most deeply and essentially *is* when we make ourselves part of an endless “maturation” process. In this milieu, the very idea that in its eventual unfolding, the positive stage might mark out an essentially oppressive and occlusive ontological site could only have seemed like utter nonsense to him. Slogans like “Science doesn’t have all the answers, yet” and “Every human problem has a technological fix” had not yet lost their innocence.

Today, of course, such slogans do not seem so innocent. To Comte, a technoscientific age could still be an entirely “positive” projection, and given his angle of vision, it would be unfair to call his idea utopian. In one of his late essays, Heidegger asks whether “the world civilization just now beginning might one day *overcome* its technological-scientific-industrial character as the *sole criterion* of our journey through the world” (GA 14, 75/60, my emphasis). Comte could never ask such a question, because he could not consider the “overcoming” of what had not yet arrived. It would have made no sense to him to ponder the need for additional, *post*-technoscientific “criteria” for our journey through the world, when the “technological-scientific-industrial character” of the world was still, with much resistance,



taking shape. To him, the emergence of science and its technologies could only *be* a happy and thoroughly progressive eventuation. With nineteenth-century eyes, he happily concludes that a “scientific view of the world” is therefore the only plausible position for enlightened minds.

For us in the “developed” West, this same conclusion—whether actually defended or just assumed—can often seem strikingly naïve, out of touch, even dangerous—especially if the context for its expression is not the rarified atmosphere of mainstream philosophy of science, but a multinational corporate boardroom, or a Pentagon office, or one of the research labs they fund, to say nothing of all those areas of the globe that “we” chauvinistically call (merely) “developing.” In general, it is now quite impossible to ignore the depressing, retrograde, even dystopian threats that often seem just as constitutive of technoscientific life as the many happy outcomes Comte predicted.

I return to this issue in my concluding chapter. Here, however, I only want to stress that it is in this concrete “factuality” of Comte’s earlier historical situation that we find the basic reason for his twofold, now-reflective, now-imperial presentation of the third stage. For on the one hand, when he is explaining the third stage developmentally—that is, when he is characterizing this stage in terms of its coming-to-be in an age that promises to fulfill our deepest expectations—he speaks from within this time and in terms of the “burden” placed upon him by a still largely theologico-metaphysical inheritance as he tries to defend the emerging scientific developments all around him. On the other hand, when he is explaining how scientific (but not theological or metaphysical) thinking can fulfill these expectations, he speaks “dogmatically”—that is, as a latter-day Cartesian whose explicit model of the standpoint of a good philosopher is one he still silently inherits from the *Meditations*—and he reasons “down” from his theories of the three kinds of philosophizing to the “consequences” of each one.

In a word, Comte sometimes speaks (as Heidegger and Gadamer would come to call it) hermeneutically; mostly, he speaks as if from Nowhere. The fact that in the end, he does more of the latter than the former is a part of the historical burden he passes on to us by way of his later sympathizers and inheritors who—sometimes candidly, often not—rely on Comte’s objectivistically reinforced sense of “maturity” to tell us that a question like Heidegger’s—that is, about the possibility of eventually “overcoming” the hegemony of a technological-scientific-industrial criterion for living—is “immature” (i.e., “belonging to the past”). From *within* a “[techno]scientific view of the world,” the very idea of *extra*-technoscientific issues in life can easily appear by definition to be ontologically unworthy and regressive. The dystopian Heideggerians of the world simply need to “grow up.” To be really educated and informed, one simply must be, as one now often hears, some sort of naturalist. For the only “known” alternative to naturalism is the return to some sort of *super*-naturalism (or romanticism, or mysticism, or . . . ).



Unlike his progeny, however, a twenty-first-century Comte would understand and welcome Heidegger's *kind* of question. He would recognize it as a properly philosophical question about how to interpret what he calls a "stage" of human life—that is, a whole general way of existing, involving a pervasive vital understanding of what things mean and what we should do about it. I think he would even agree that, were it ever to become necessary to ask whether the positive stage really is the sort of "ending" it initially seemed to be, this is not a question that can be addressed piecemeal, occasionally, between the lines, in strategic discussions focused primarily on how to plan, control, or conceptually clarify this or that specific methodological or practical problem.<sup>5</sup>

Is a fourth stage desirable, or even possible? Of course, taken one way, this is a silly question. Why should the world not become *more* technoscientific? Even among the more disillusioned critics in the capitalist/democratic West, there is obviously something profoundly right about Comte's projection. It remains, in some sense, both a true and a "developmentally" appropriate picture of what is everywhere in fact "occurring." Indeed, it even seems somewhat selfish and chauvinistic for those in the "developed" world to cry for a slowdown, and it anyway makes no sense to consider a world that is not (or is no longer) technoscientific. As Heidegger says, one can imagine or logically entertain the idea of an entirely non- or post-technoscientific existence, but one cannot really "think" it.

Comte's positivistic idea of humanity's third stage is therefore best seen, I believe, not as dead or surpassed but as becoming instead something that continues to function underground, as a legacy that defines a kind of ontological atmosphere that lingers for us even after all the specific epistemological and socio-political theories once enthusiastically recommended in its light have been repudiated or transformed. As a legacy it strongly encourages, we might say, a way of being oriented in the world that is still so widely and routinely "sensed" in a Comtean way that it often taints contemporary philosophical debates about science and technology even before they start. Despite all the recent fuss about the demise of grand narratives, positivism seems obviously to be such a grand narrative—indeed THE grand narrative of the most of the developed world. But to use the language of the early Heidegger, this narrative is in our environmental experience, not in our consciously affirmed propositions. Hence, rather than dismiss Comte's idea as nothing but a latter-day version of the old speculative philosophies of history, we might better call it, in Rouse's colorful phrase, a philosophical vampire—that is, something "undead that still haunts our concepts and interpretations of nature, culture, and science."<sup>6</sup> A Comtean (objectivistic, imperial) sense of technoscientific existence as constituting the "maturity" of humanity continues to impede critical inquiry about the problematic character of our age, not because it is widely embraced, but precisely because it continues to operate in the thinking of so many who are sure they have rejected the outlook because they have rejected its infamous "theories."



Comte's logical positivist and empiricist progeny compounded the problem by calling his sense of things mere sentiment. For this seems to rationalize "the scientific worldview" away as something obvious but inconsequential—giving philosophers license to ignore it, and to imagine that perhaps someday we will all simply find that we "feel" differently (and of course again, by definition, also all too "obviously" better). The result has been the widespread emergence of a false philosophical confidence that we can and for the most part already have become postpositivistic because we have *decided* to be so. Grand narratives have been left behind. Positivistic conceptions of knowledge and of either global technoscientific optimism or pessimism are being avoided, and in place of traditional essentialist talk of Knowledge or Reality or Science or Technology *Überhaupt*, we are all engaged in empirical, or postpositivist, or pragmatist, or phenomenological analyses of actual propositional claims, or practices, or materials, or technoscientifically mediated experiences, as we draw on the latest research and steer clear of mere "speculation."<sup>7</sup>

This surface-inspired picture of contemporary philosophical debate is neither accurate nor innocent. It silently leaves in place the inherited technoscientific optimism of an earlier time, even when it is not explicitly rewarded with Carnap's self-congratulatory label of "the basic orientation . . . with which we all feel an inner kinship." Reconsidering Comte's three-stage story offers all parties to the current debates the possibility of developing a more reflective and candid philosophical self-understanding. Now that the age he anticipated seems to have arrived, can we still assume, as he did, that our most satisfying future lies in ever more of the same under optimized conditions? Is he right about a "developed" Western civilization—namely, that it is moving inevitably toward the fulfillment of all our most fundamental material and spiritual needs?

In Part II, I argue with the help of Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger that the answer to this question will probably turn out to be No, but that learning how to say this presents us with a "problem of history" that is neither fundamentally epistemological (as Dilthey shows), nor even scientific (as Nietzsche argues), but ontological and even "pre-philosophical" (as Heidegger concludes). In the end, it seems, we are going to find ourselves dissatisfied *in principle* with Comte's technoscientifically optimistic understanding of human practices and human life, even if we admit that there are many situations—indeed, a preponderance of situations—in which we, too, are happy Comtean pragmatists, and even if we, too, are unwilling to return to the bad old days of theology and metaphysics. I develop this argument in three steps, linked at least minimally to separate chapters on Dilthey, Nietzsche, and two on Heidegger. In Chapters 5 and 6, however, although I start with discussions of Dilthey and Nietzsche, respectively, I conclude that each is most helpfully viewed in light of a "post-Comtean" construal of the question of how history matters to philosophy—a construal of the sort provided by



Heidegger. Of course, there is much else that might be said about all three thinkers. My point here will be that a full understanding of the problems bequeathed to us by the idea that human life fulfills itself in something like Comte's third stage, requires nothing less than a radical reconsideration of "who" we are when we dream his consummatory dream.

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., SPP2, 85/68; CPP1(2), 75/F, 45; and SPP4a, 607/161, respectively.
2. I discuss this issue in *Comte after Positivism*, 95–127, where I argue against the common interpretation, which tries to explain (often badly) rather than understand this conflict. Many conclude that Comte simply failed to be a "consistent positivist." The trouble with this approach is that whether one measures the alleged inconsistency against a current conception of positivism or a conception allegedly extracted from Comte's own writings, in either case one distorts his position by reading this conception back into him *as* an explicit idea and then criticizing him for inconsistently adhering to it. The point is to keep hold of the fact that Comte is irreducibly both a historical-minded defender of an emerging positive stage for philosophy and, at other times, its seemingly imperial promoter—and that the latter tendency prevails in our inheritance of him.
3. Thus, for Comte, "No matter how prominent the positive spirit may have become, one must never forget that in every case it emanated from practical activity by a gradual substitution of the study of laws for a study of causes. Even the universal principle of invariable natural relations . . . is itself an essentially empirical acquisition. *So far from originating in the dogmatism of earlier times, it was directly opposed to it*; and this accounts for its slow and gradual formation, which has only just been completed by the founding of sociology" (SPP1, 428–29/347, my emphasis). This "gradual substitution" has been, obviously, at the successive expense of theology and metaphysics.
4. For Comte, of course, mature thinking and technoscientifically guided practice will never be more than "predominant," given that at any given moment the world is not populated only by adults, and it is highly unlikely that worldly conditions will ever be so ideal that everyone has an equal chance to gain maturity.
5. Yes, I ignore here the fact that Comte would not have understood Heidegger's insistence that one must see this as an "ontological" question, not just a socio-historical (i.e., "ontic") one. I take up this issue in the chapters that follow.
6. "Vampires: Social Constructivism, Realism, and Other Philosophical Undead," *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 60–78, at 63. Rouse's own use of this idea is restricted to illuminating various ways in which philosophers of science enact it to block consideration of historical, political, social, cultural, and gender studies of science.
7. For analytic philosophy generally, see, e.g., Brian Leiter, ed., *The Future for [analytic] Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For philosophy of science, see especially Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes*, esp. 6–14. For philosophy of technology, see, e.g., Hans Achterhuis, *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, trans. Robert P. Crease (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern



University Press, 1993); Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, trans. Robert P. Crease (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Larry A. Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); and Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).



## 5 Dilthey

### From Epistemology to the Problem of History

Wilhelm Dilthey became famous, and for the most part has remained famous, for being an epistemological pioneer of the specifically “human” sciences. The *Geisteswissenschaften*, he argued, try to “understand” historical human life as we live it, unlike the natural sciences which try to “explain” the external world as we observe it. Hence, to the extent that Dilthey is remembered today, he is usually associated with his role in the *Erklären-Verstehen* debate. For in raising the possibility that there are fundamentally different methods for fundamentally different types of science, Dilthey puts into play all the standard issues in mainstream philosophy of science—that is, issues concerning the nature of scientific explanation and justification, the unity and diversity of scientific disciplines, the metaphysical status of its subject matter, the accessibility of various subject matters to research, and so on.

In the Anglo-American tradition, Dilthey’s role continues to be interpreted primarily in terms of these epistemological issues.<sup>1</sup> In some circles, however, and especially in the Continental European tradition, the very existence of an *Erklären-Verstehen* debate is interpreted as posing a problem that all the hardest line logical empiricist must eventually come to realize cannot be resolved epistemologically. *That* there is even serious controversy over whether there are “types” of method, with different purposes of study, for different (e.g., “human,” not merely “natural”) phenomena—all of this raises a prior ontological question about the nature of the reality (or realities) studied by the science, not just the usual epistemic questions about how to do “it” better.

Yet in the end, Dilthey’s arguments raise a problem that is finally neither epistemological nor ontological, but is rather at bottom what Heidegger calls hermeneutical, and its resolution requires that we focus first, not on the issue of objects of science or of the methods of studying them, but on the character of the philosophical orientation that is or ought to be assumed by those taking sides in the debates. What is it to “be” a philosopher “of” science (i.e., “who” is one), when it is science itself that constitutes the primary topic? As Heidegger claims and I shall argue, these



questions already lead Dilthey himself toward the conclusion that the philosophical orientation required—he calls it the “standpoint of life”—is one for which “the problem of history” very definitely and explicitly matters. Viewed in this way, Dilthey’s struggles to produce a “Critique of Historical Reason” make it possible to raise again the reflective question that Comte still demanded we ask, but in a way that does not require his answer—namely, if philosophy, like all human practices, is historical to the core, then what is it to “be” philosophical—about science or anything else—should be addressed first.

My discussion of Dilthey has three main parts. First, I analyze Dilthey’s association with the original epistemological debates. The main purpose is to show how he ultimately makes the *Erklären-Verstehen* distinction, as an expression of the practices of studying Nature and Historical Life, respectively, a “hermeneutical problem” to be addressed from the “standpoint of life” (§§1–3). Second, I explain why both Husserl and Heidegger see Dilthey’s conception of this standpoint as philosophically more significant than the *Erklären-Verstehen* distinction itself. I start with Husserl, both because he shows us how not to read Dilthey (§4) and because Heidegger’s interpretation is in part also a critique of Husserl’s (§5). Finally, I consider what Heidegger calls his “appropriation” of Dilthey, which retraces the line of philosophical development from Dilthey’s initial and mostly epistemic and critical reaction to naturalistic objectivism to his formulation of “the [hermeneutic] problem of historical life” (§6–7). In this way, I will have set the stage for my discussions of Nietzsche and Heidegger himself in the next two chapters, where I argue that raising “the problem of history” ultimately forces us back to the question of what it means to “be” historical that Heidegger makes a central issue in the early lecture courses leading up to SZ. But before all this, we need some historical background to understand why Dilthey’s suggestion that there could two sorts of science could stimulate such vigorous debate in the first place.

## TWO KINDS OF SCIENCE? WHAT IS AT STAKE

Given the widespread embrace of what logical empiricists called the “scientific view of the world,” it is easy to see why there should be such strong opposition to Dilthey’s position, and not just among philosophical hardliners. Stated quickly, the main problem with accepting a robust *Erklären-Verstehen* distinction is that it challenges the basic idea of the methodological unity of the sciences. In nineteenth-century philosophy generally and for twentieth-century philosophy of science specifically, three things seem self-evident. Scientific success is a social fact; this success depends on the use in every science of some variant of a single method; and the main job of a philosophy of science is to formalize this method and defend the need for it. In light of these assumptions, any claim that there might be fundamentally



different “types” of science or scientific method would appear to threaten the very idea of scientific success. Even now, loose talk about many sciences and many approaches to many topics is often dismissed as postmodernist excess.

Today, we sometimes forget just how high the stakes regarding this issue have traditionally been taken to be, not just epistemologically but socio-politically. As noted in Chapter 4, the logical empiricists (at least before they emigrated) appealed often to a scientific “attitude” or “sentiment” they claimed to feel all around them. This appeal is obviously not just a declaration of epistemological preference. It was also an expression of the “positive spirit” concerning human progress, inherited (albeit in greater part silently) from the nineteenth century. Indeed, judging by the claims of the more conservative participants in today’s science wars, many thinkers still share the perception that all scientific practice must be Scientific in the “standard” sense or the modern world is in danger—although many of the defenders of this view are even less reflectively honest about it than their predecessors. I refer of course to the kind of outrage still expressed in some quarters whenever anyone appears to challenge the traditional conception of science and its political importance namely, that this constitutes a sin against Enlightened Rationality.<sup>2</sup> In short, in the opinion of everyone from Comte to the Vienna Circle positivists, and for many more down to the present day, all talk about different ways of knowing and multiple types of reality can mean only one thing—the threat of a return to something like the bad old pre-Enlightenment days of superstition and speculation, when all manner of fools and dogmatists claimed to know all manner of alleged truths using all manner of alleged methods.

In any case, the unity-of-science argument is clearly no brainchild of the logical empiricists, and it was never a strictly epistemological concern. It was, from the beginning, the philosophical expression of a broadly secular, anti-speculative, science-promoting, and socio-politically progressive worldview.<sup>3</sup> I stress the point here, in order to forestall the common mistake of assuming that the *Erklären-Verstehen* debate must be primarily about epistemology since the twentieth-century logical empiricists set it up this way. Because they made the most noise, general textbook accounts have often simply adopted the same focus, and then retold the whole story in terms of the methodological disagreements between positivists and mainstream empiricists on one side and the progeny of the German historical school, Dilthey, and Southwest German neo-Kantians on the other. When they are not strictly historical, most of these textbook accounts conclude the story with the explanation that in retrospect, one sees that the debate was really just an artifact of excessively zealous positivists facing opaque Continental writers—at a time when the latter could not make plain and we did not yet realize that all science is interpretive and all interpretation is contextual. With the disappearance of logical empiricism and with the introduction of allegedly clearer Anglophone restatements of the initially obscure Continental claims



about context and interpretation, what could there be left to debate? A well-known quip by Charles Taylor is frequently used to confirm this post-positivist story. Imagine he says, all those “old-guard Diltheyans, their shoulders hunched from years-long resistance against the encroaching pressure of positivist natural science, suddenly pitch[ing] forward on their faces as all opposition ceases to the reign of universal hermeneutics.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, however, the debate cannot be settled in strictly epistemological terms, because the underlying problem is not whether *Verstehen* can be made “scientific” in the predetermined positivist sense. The real issue is this very positivist sense of science itself as an adequate characterization of an actual human practice. Once the objectivistic orientation of positivism that framed the debate for decades was out in the open and out of fashion, it became clear that the predominant arguments against *Verstehen* had to be met, not with counterarguments alone but with a challenge to positivism’s long-unquestioned epistemic orientation.<sup>5</sup> After political and ideological tempers cooled, two main directions were taken from here. One led directly to pluralistic redefinitions of the scientific method by a variety of self-identified “post”positivists who regarded themselves inspired by the need to make philosophy less arrogantly normative and more responsive to actual scientific practice.<sup>6</sup> However, those who moved in the other direction paused instead to reflect first on the question of what sort of philosophical orientation is suitable if one wishes to think about science as a human practice—and especially if one is suspicious of the assumption that “science” of any sort constitutes the model for human praxis par excellence.<sup>7</sup> Dilthey influenced postpositivist philosophy of science in both directions.

## DILTHEY’S “SECOND” KIND OF SCIENCE

From the start, Dilthey grounds his defense of *Verstehen* in an anti-positivistic “Critique of Historical Reason.” Neither his conception of *Verstehen* itself, nor his opinion about what keeps it from getting a fair hearing is ever strictly methodological. He does not, for example, think natural-scientific explanation is always “nomothetic” and human-scientific understanding, always “idiographic,” nor does he insist on rigid separation between the two procedures.<sup>8</sup> Thinking especially of Comte and Mill, Dilthey argues that judging from both their general conception of scientific practice and their specific analyses of the objects of genuinely scientific research, their epistemological model betrays and excessive attraction to the physical sciences.

It is true that an observational outlook, the quantification of findings, and a focus on prediction—all of these requirements and restrictions—are rightly stressed if one’s aim is to “explain” natural phenomena. But they are inappropriate for disciplines that want instead to “understand” human-historical life—that is, to consider what Dilthey calls “the total nexus of



psychic/historical reality” as this is “possessed” in lived experience (*Erlebnis*).<sup>9</sup> Those who study natural events by considering the way they confront us externally can know nothing of this other possibility, since for them it is a matter of epistemic principle that all one is only permitted to say of lived experiencing is that it is going on inside observable bodies. Dilthey points out, however, that in contrast to the way reality, as “nature,” is there for me in experimentally enhanced observation, historical life “does not confront me as sensually perceived or represented . . . but is there-for-me because I . . . possess it *unmediated* and as in some sense belonging to me (GS 6:313/223, translation altered). Today, Dilthey’s line of reasoning seems perfectly familiar. I rehearse it here only to underscore the fact that, contrary to the way it is often reported, Dilthey’s approach is primarily ontological, not epistemological. For him, the reason why we need a second way of studying human beings is precisely because we are “human” beings. Of course, it is true that human actions can be observed and predictive theories can be generated about their behaviors. But it is also true that human beings (and their creations) can be encountered and understood. We “are,” in other words, both natural *and* psychic-historical beings. Hence, as Dilthey conceives it, *Verstehen* is not another way to look at reality; it is the right way to look at another reality.

To explain something is to *think of it as* part of objective nature; to understand something is to *think of it as* part of psychic-historical life. And here is the basic problem. The issue has never been about pluralizing epistemologies—and not even about the socio-political implications of doing so. It is at bottom about ontology.<sup>10</sup> Dilthey’s opponents are sure that he fails to get Reality right, and because their side has been winning for centuries, it is hard for them to be more than dismissively tolerant of anyone so deeply wrong. Positivists and postpositivists, riding the mainstream tradition, are objectivistic, but Dilthey, somehow, seems to know that natural and psychic-historical entities “are” genuinely and irreducibly different. The question, of course, is how can he know this?

In considering the implications of Dilthey’s position, then, we must keep in view not just his epistemic arguments but the standpoint from which he makes them. As an *epistemologist of the human sciences*, he does indeed see himself as legitimating a second conception of scientific method. But he understands that in order to do this successfully, he must also *think ontologically about scientific objects in general*. In this latter respect, he portrays himself as an opponent of positivist philosophy, not just an epistemological defender of human science. For he sees clearly that if it is one’s default position to define “experience,” “reality,” and “knowledge” in deference to natural science, this is not just a sign of epistemic preference. It is the expression of fundamental ontological preference, and in a philosophical atmosphere already shot through with this preference, the case for a second kind of scientific method, no matter how well-formed and forcefully argued, cannot get a fair hearing. One must attack the undeserved hegemony of the



natural-scientific background understanding of “knowing subject,” “external world,” and “explanatory” method as expressive of bias, and show that it does not define a topic-neutral philosophical orientation, as positivists assume. Only by challenging the hegemony of this implicit ontology can one establish that a positivistic outlook—however appropriate it is in regards to an epistemology of nature—is not competent to be a general frame of reference for philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, says Dilthey, the positivistic idealization of the standpoint of natural science gets things backward. When we study natural science as a human practice, instead of taking positivist self-descriptions of this practice at face value, we discover that its theories are the main example of one of the three classes of life’s manifestations (*Lebensäußerungen*)—specifically, that class of “cognitive” expressions comprising representative “concepts, judgments, and larger thought-formations.” The primary characteristic of these expressions is their abstractness from life. They are “detached from the lived experience in which they arose, and . . . adapted to logical norms,” in order to insure that their content “remains the same in every context,” so that their meaning “is the same for the one who formulates them and the one who understands them.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, for observation reports and predictive theories to BE observation reports and predictive theories, they must be thought solely in the direction of their use and never in the direction of their genesis. Indeed, their efficacy depends on this. Collectively speaking, explanations in the natural sciences are like the Great Oz. They continue to do their work so long as one ignores what is behind the curtain—just as long, that is, as one refrains from “disclos[ing] how the[ir] logical content . . . is related to the dark background and the fullness of psychic life” out of which such theories develop.<sup>13</sup>

Dilthey’s account here is neither critique nor strong-program social constructivism. Nor is it merely a reminder that philosophers of science, unlike practicing scientists, cannot ignore the context of discovery. Rather, his aim is to make explicit and underscore the necessity of the relation between their self-imposed restrictions and the effectiveness of their theorizing. For theirs is a very powerful set of restrictions indeed. It involves a kind of blanket refusal, a kind of studied disinterest in any disclosure of natural science itself *as a human practice*.<sup>14</sup> Natural science thus exists as the practice it IS, precisely in and through a *suppressed* utilization of, as Dilthey calls it, “the standpoint of experienced life” itself. Once the matter is put this way, however, a crucial philosophical implication must eventually become obvious. The very same characteristics that make the outlook of natural science possible also make this same outlook unsuitable *as philosophy*. Natural science becomes the success it is by a studied forgetfulness of its lifeworld origins. When philosophy does the same thing, it simply becomes arrogant.<sup>15</sup> The question then obviously arises, what should the standpoint of philosophy should be instead.



## DILTHEY'S "STANDPOINT OF LIFE"

There is some evidence that Dilthey actually sees this issue concerning general philosophical orientations, but it would certainly be an overstatement to say he considers it. Stated quickly, in his late work, we find that his struggle to discriminate between natural and human science repeatedly drives him back toward the idea of what he calls the "standpoint of life"—a standpoint to which, depending on the context, he usually gives a narrower epistemic meaning but sometimes seems to understand in a wider philosophical sense.

Most of the time, he describes this as the standpoint of directly experienced "historical human life" as we live through it—and thus also as the standpoint adopted by human scientists, who want to understand this life "in terms of itself." In this narrower sense, the standpoint of life is for the human scientist what the observational standpoint is for the natural scientist; and the task of a Critique of Historical Reason is to show that the latter can never be the model for the former because from its highly specialized and epistemically constrained perspective, many things can be "explained" but nothing can be "understood." In his 1883 *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, in what is perhaps his most famous remark, Dilthey announces that in order to clarify the basis on which the human sciences "form an independent knowledge system," he finds that he will have to reconceive "the whole context of the facts of consciousness." The problem, he says, is the implicit sense of how natural scientific knowers understand their relations with the world.

No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject *constructed* by Locke, Hume and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought. A historical as well as psychological approach to whole human beings led me to explain even [natural] knowledge and its concepts (such as 'external world') in terms of the manifold powers of a being that wills, feels, and thinks. . . . (GS 1:xviii/SW 1:50–51, my emphasis)

Note that Dilthey really makes two points here, not just one. The obvious implication of the fact that "knowing subject" and "external world" are theoretical *constructs* is that, given the "undiluted" form in which the human sciences want to understand life, they must seek their origination point not in a knowing subject, but in what Dilthey calls the "real life-process" of the "whole human being" itself, as it "wills, feels, and thinks." Yet the much less obvious but far more radical implication of this line of reasoning is that the real question for philosophy is finally not about two methods, or even the two subject matters deserving of two methods. It is about the "standpoint" from which one thinks *all* this. My effort to ground



the human sciences, says Dilthey, led me to take a “historical as well as psychological approach to whole human beings”—an approach that not only secures their foundation but showed me that natural knowledge and its constructions, too, originate in and receive their sense from the pre-cognitive but “understandable” lives of these whole human beings.

Hence, Dilthey occasionally depicts the standpoint of life much more generously, apparently driven by a sense of the radical philosophical implications of his refusal to ground the human sciences in an observational standpoint. Ultimately, he suggests, the phrase, “standpoint of life,” is really just a comprehensive philosophical name for the outlook that is attuned to the everyday, lived-through sense of things in terms of which we human beings already possess and *understand in a pre-scientific way* all of our “manifold powers”—including, of course, our powers to develop both natural- and human-scientific knowledge. As Ricoeur observes in Dilthey’s work

historical understanding is not exactly the counterpart of the theory of nature; the relationship between life and its expressions was rather the common root of the double relationship of man to nature and of man to history. If we follow this suggestion, the problem is not to strengthen historical knowledge in the face of physical knowledge but to burrow under scientific knowledge, taken in all its generality, in order to reach a relation between historical being and the whole of being that is more primordial than the subject-object relation in epistemology.<sup>16</sup>

So for example, from the beginning, Dilthey conceives his supposedly epistemic task in an unorthodox way, for he assigns himself the job not only a grounding analysis of the human sciences but also of demonstrating that these sciences are destined to replace the traditional sort of “metaphysics of society and history” that he saw as having engaged in fending off a reductive naturalism about life for the right reasons but with the wrong tools.<sup>17</sup> To tackle both jobs already calls for a philosophical “standpoint” that is more than that of an epistemologist of a second group of human sciences, or even more than that of a comparative epistemologist concerned with differentiating its method from explanation in the natural sciences. It is the standpoint of someone who, like Comte, understands that any philosophizing about science stands in the midst of circumstances where current practices already come understood in inherited ways that these practices themselves disclose to be inadequate. And like Comte, Dilthey thinks that this tension between what he inherits (i.e., natural science, universalizing and overextending the method of its success, and a dated metaphysics of life fighting rearguard battles against this) and what he lives through (i.e., the possibility of understanding life in a systematic way, now obscured by philosophical naturalism) is a phenomenon that responsible philosophers must address.



Consider also, in this light, Dilthey's remarks in this late passage from his unfinished "Critique." Looking back on the historical work he has already done to establish the possibility of human sciences, he concludes that

[T]oday hermeneutics enters a context that assigns the human sciences a new, important task. It has always defended the reliability of understanding against historical skepticism and subjective arbitrariness. . . . [but] now hermeneutics must define its task relative to the [general] epistemological task of demonstrating that it is possible to know the nexus of the historical world and to find the means for bringing it about. (GS 7:217–18/238)

This remark is of course open to either the narrower construal (i.e., the neo-Kantian model of epistemology, applied to the human sciences) or a broader one (in which case, as Heidegger will insist, it points away from strictly analytic or even comparative epistemological accounts of *Verstehen* and toward the question of what is the nature of a science—any science—and what sort of philosopher is fit to ask this question).<sup>18</sup> Everything depends upon how one interprets what Dilthey thinks is the "general epistemological task" of his time and whether the hermeneutics that defines its own task "relative" to this general epistemological one is still itself really just epistemological in its concerns. In what tone of voice does he call the human-historical world the "starting point" (*Anfang*) and tell us that it

is always there, and the individual does not merely contemplate it from without but is intertwined with it. It is impossible to sever these relations. . . . We are historical beings before being observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter. (GS 7:277–78/297)

Given Dilthey's wide-ranging and decades-long pursuit of historico-critical studies of the rise of "historical consciousness," his equally frequent references to the success and the philosophical overextension of natural scientific cognition, to the impossibility of a metaphysics of human life, and to the non-naturalistic character of historical life, lived experience, *Verstehen*, etc.—given his treatments of all these "general" issues, Heidegger has to be right, that Dilthey is "on the way" here to something philosophically much more expansive than his Kantian plan for a second "Critique" projects.

Either way, however, the standpoint of life actually functions in Dilthey's later work as his *own* basic orientation—that is, he speaks from this orientation, not just about it. It informs both what he says about the proper orientation for human scientific studies and what he says more generally about the "historical life" one might of course study, but which in any case is that "*erlebt Leben*" in which we stand and in terms of which we have all manner of "understandable" encounters and actions. The standpoint of life,



he says, is the standpoint of our living-thought of life itself—something never more than partially articulated, “back behind which thought cannot go.” Yet if reason never gets behind experienced life, a hermeneutical philosophy might try to start with and think from this truth about it. Indeed, Dilthey occasionally talks about cultivating a reflectively enhanced philosophical self-awareness—a “*Selbstbesinnung*”—precisely of this lived-through sense of things, so that we might come to recognize how both “understanding life” and “explaining nature” must equally be regarded as manifestations of “lived-through” possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

The upshot of Dilthey’s scattered remarks, then, is that there appears to be the possibility of establishing a *selbstbesinnlich* perspective from which all life-possibilities could be considered without playing ontological (and thus also epistemic) favorites—that is, where what I have been calling “vital understanding” is itself the phenomenon considered. As both Husserl and Heidegger realized, such a perspective might really deserve the elevation to general philosophical status that positivists wrongly claim for the objectivistic outlook of the natural sciences.<sup>20</sup> Both of them take up this issue and make it central to their own concerns. I will treat their efforts serially, since Heidegger works out his conception in response to Husserl as well as Dilthey.

### DILTHEY’S STANDPOINT, PHENOMENOLOGICALLY INTERPRETED (HUSSERL)

For Husserl, whatever there is to praise in his descriptions of life phenomena, Dilthey the philosopher needs to be corrected, not appropriated or (as Heidegger will say) “destructive retrieved”. He argues that because Dilthey’s conception of the “standpoint of life” only emerges in conjunction with his efforts to discredit positivism, it comes too late and is too much conceived as a mere negation to be able to stand philosophically on its own. Granted, Dilthey *claims* that the “experiential possession of life” is the root source for the ontological, epistemic, and theoretical constructs in both kinds of science. But how, asks Husserl, does he know this? Again, Dilthey *claims* the standpoint of life is not merely the epistemological perspective of one kind of science. And he *claims* to be guarding science against skepticism and subjectivism. But Husserl objects that even in his late works, Dilthey still thinks of this standpoint as “psychological” and (still more troubling) as “historical.”

Husserl, we know, at least initially insists upon hearing these adjectives with an empiricist’s ear—that is, as betraying an essentially relativistic-historicist position, and so as a threat to the “rigorous” philosophical ideal that Husserl himself wishes to defend.<sup>21</sup> The relation between Husserl and Dilthey is more complex than the follow summary suggests. In their correspondence, Dilthey succeeds in disabusing Husserl of his initially harsh judgment of Dilthey’s work, and Husserl eventually confesses to being “overly influenced” by Ebbinghaus’ review of Dilthey’s *Ideen*. Nevertheless,



the general point of importance here is that all his later generosity must be recognized for what it always remains—namely, a critical reconsideration by Husserl the phenomenologist, who now perhaps sees new possibilities for enriching phenomenology by consulting Dilthey's descriptions of psychic and historical life, but only after establishing that a phenomenological consciousness oriented toward true "science" can never be a "historical" consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Husserl therefore never wavers in his opinion that phenomenology must necessarily *replace* Dilthey's "reflections from the standpoint of life," not just exploit them. He concludes that Dilthey may have avoided the naturalism that results from universalizing the outlook of mathematical physics, but his position is still tainted by psychologistic and historicist versions of the same disease.

Here as elsewhere, Husserl is famously and resolutely anti-naturalist—which he understands to involve the rejection of any philosophy that seems to make foundationalist use of a natural or social scientific perspective. Just as famously, however, Husserl himself has been widely criticized for the vestiges of traditional objectivism that his anti-naturalism appears to bring with it. A two-sided reaction to Husserl's phenomenology continues to the present day.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, there has been wide acceptance of his view that practicing scientists are too focused on their little corners of the world, and traditional epistemologists of science have been too focused on analyzing the procedures of science, to ask the right philosophical questions about science itself, or the character of its different objects, or how it relates as a practice to other things human beings do and care about. On the other hand, Husserl's idea of the sort of phenomenology that would avoid these pitfalls has proven much less acceptable.

To state the punch line of a nearly one-hundred-year debate, the main problem his readers have found with Husserl's phenomenology does not lie in what he attempts to *do*. It lies with his apparently still very traditional understanding of *who does it*. For at least as he initially describes it, phenomenology has a founder; it must be a movement; it is destined to become the ultimate positivism and true guardian of the Western scientific ideal—and most problematically, it must think of itself as the phenomenology of a transcendental-rational *consciousness*, whose "pure" and methodologically secured standpoint guarantees the establishment of a properly rigorous philosophically approach that will finally get us "to the things themselves" as they really are. And of course, a truly "scientific" philosophy must avoid historical entanglements. Philosophers do not become philosophers by studying other philosophies and other times, says Husserl. Philosophy's past might happen to inspire us, but

remaining immersed in the historical, forcing oneself to work therein in historico-critical activity, and wanting to attain philosophical science by means of eclectic elaboration or anachronistic renaissance—all that leads to nothing but hopeless efforts. The impulse to research must not



proceed from philosophies but from things and from the problems connected with them. . . . Above all it must not rest until it has attained its own absolutely clear beginnings. (PRS, 196)

The question, of course, is whether one must “force” oneself to stay historically in the midst of things, or whether imagining that one will stay there only if one is (unphilosophically) resolute is itself an expression of someone who IS in the midst of things . . . in a very determinately modern, Cartesian, mathematically favoring cognitive way.

Heidegger, especially, is put off by the traditionalism—not to say Cartesianism—of Husserl’s philosophical self-descriptions. Even while still Husserl’s assistant, he was urging others to distinguish what phenomenology might become from what Husserl says it must be.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, many of Husserl’s substantive accounts—for example, of number, of perception, of the lived as opposed to the anatomical body, of the lifeworld origins of and differences between the mathematical and empirical sciences—all these concrete phenomenologies are clearly superior to the accounts of the various positivists, neo-Kantians, and traditional metaphysicians of his day.

On the other hand, phenomena must be treated phenomenologically to be properly understood—if, that is, they are to show themselves as themselves from themselves in their being.<sup>25</sup> Yet when Heidegger listens to the philosophical arguments among the members of these schools, *including Husserl’s*, what is most striking is how similar—and unphenomenological—is their implicit understanding of themselves as philosophers. Each of them claims to speak for scientists who are too preoccupied with what they are doing to reflect on how the practice works; each seeks a model of “essential” epistemic structures for science that is not relative to place and time; and all of them tend to think that first we must settle what *science* knows and then we can figure out what else there is.

In short, the young Heidegger sees himself surrounded by philosophers who—whether neo-Kantian, positivist, traditionally metaphysical, or even Husserlian—still talk as if they were Cartesian subjects—that is, idealized meta-scientific knowers who have resolutely removed their minds from the circumstances not only of scientific practice, but of culture, society, history (. . . and, we should now surely add, race, ethnicity, and gender). However, Dilthey’s descriptions of historical life taught the young Heidegger to see irony here. Observe all these supposedly detached and objective thinkers, quarreling among themselves in disregard of their deeply different and anything but “neutral” outlooks, which are usually the cause of the disagreements in the first place! In fact, “even unbiased seeing is a seeing and as such has its position of looking and indeed has it in a distinctive manner, i.e., by having explicitly appropriated it so that it has been critically purged.” The very idea of a position that is “*freedom from all standpoints* . . . is itself something historical . . . not a chimerical in-itself outside of time” (GA 63:83/64).



The conclusion to be drawn is obvious. Before we plunge into any more explorations of what there is and how we know it—and thus before we consider the “problem of history” as a question for the philosophy of science—we must have some “preparatory” reflection on the question of what it means to “be” a thoroughly contextualized, historically determinate philosopher . . . about *anything*. This, famously, is Heidegger’s lead question in SZ, and I will discuss it further in Chapter 7. In the remainder of the present chapter, however, I consider a bit further what Heidegger finds most promising—and thus most worth retrieving, appropriating, and carrying forward—in Dilthey’s own writings. In Chapter 7, I focus more on Dilthey’s still very traditional philosophical self-conception—which Heidegger argues must be critically dismantled or destroyed, in order for his retrieval to become possible.

### DILTHEY’S STANDPOINT, HERMENEUTICALLY APPROPRIATED (HEIDEGGER)

For the first several decades and for the majority of commentators thereafter, the accounts of Heidegger’s intellectual development understandably tend to stress his relation to his famous teacher, Husserl. Yet Heidegger’s early lectures (1919–25) show that in formulating the drafts of what was to become *Being and Time*, Dilthey’s importance actually surpasses Husserl’s.<sup>26</sup> When Husserl reads Dilthey, says Heidegger, his traditional anti-historicism leads him to treat the “occasion [as one] for the refutations . . . of obscurities,” instead of as an opening toward the question of “who” philosophizes and how this issue can be made reflectively explicit in a milieu that still takes for granted the self-evidence of the traditional modern stance of objectivity and distance.<sup>27</sup> What Dilthey’s work really calls for is a “positive appropriation”—that is, an interpretation that lets it “stand as it is”—which is something quite different from measuring it against the work of Natorp or Husserl or anyone else. For in this work, “something like a new and distinctive awareness of existence (*Daseinsbewußtsein*) first gradually took shape,” because in spite of the fact that he came toward this phenomenon out of an explicit concern for the epistemology of the historical-human sciences, Dilthey nevertheless understood that “life in history was itself an existential possibility that he himself lived,” and it is this philosophical enactment of historical existence itself that grounds the epistemic idea of understanding life in its own terms (GA 17:90–91/66–67). As we will see in Chapter 7, passages like this should be kept in mind when commenting on the early lecture courses in which Heidegger presents his own phenomenological conception of immediate awareness—of, for example, my “initial taking notice of how I originally find myself,” as he says in WS 1919 (GA 58:111–12/87–88)—in terms of sustained critiques of Natorp’s reconstructive account of the “givenness” of experience on the one hand and Husserl’s conception of



its immediate and intuitive presence on the other. What motivates these critiques is what he has *already learned* from Dilthey; hence in his 1919–1921 discussions of Natorp and Husserl, he is working out of a Diltheyan sense of being-historical he has already achieved, not working toward an embrace of Dilthey that might follow upon the discovery that Natorp and Husserl are found wanting.

In short, Heidegger's study of Dilthey starts much earlier and is much more thorough than most commentaries report. By the time of his SS 1920 lecture course, *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, Heidegger already displays a through familiarity with Dilthey's work and presents a considered view as to how and why this work shows superior promise when it is judged, not "from the outside"—in accordance with all his talk about human scientific epistemology—but rather in its own terms and in light of the challenges it poses to the underlying assumptions that define the "contemporary philosophical problem situation" (GA 59:153–54/118–19). This lecture course, long known to us via its misremembered title and the discussion of it in *On the Way to Language*, ends with a comparison of Natorp and Dilthey, not just regarding their opinions about the foundation of the human sciences, but in terms of the basic character of their philosophies. Even at this early date, Heidegger focuses clearly on the question of philosophy's facticity, of its starting and remaining in the midst of life—and then on the one hand, underscores Natorp's utter failure to even ask about "the enactment of the philosophical attitude" (GA 59:149/115) and on the other hand, praises Dilthey's "significant assertion" that all thought "is by an inner compulsion bound to life . . . [and] is itself a formation of life."<sup>28</sup>

Anyone familiar with Heidegger's SZ will of course see immediately the connection between these youthful expressions of "hermeneutic" concern and the approach he explicitly adopts by 1927. But it is important to note both how much credit the young Heidegger gives to Dilthey for having inspired this approach—and how much credit, in my opinion, Dilthey does in fact deserve. Unfortunately in most commentary, even today, whatever initial words of praise might be given to Dilthey's originality, the last word is typically about his epistemological limitations. On the "conservative" side, one still hears the old complaint that the very idea of two kinds of science with two kinds of method violates the basic idea of a "unified science" (with natural science still providing—at least roughly, non-formally, and "realistically"—the proper model for the method(s) of any science).<sup>29</sup> On the revisionist or radical side, the complaint is that by shoving off in the direction of the human sciences with his traditional self-conception as a philosopher of science, Dilthey allows natural science to keep its traditionally dominant but undeserved epistemic role and thus leaves an ontological distinction between "life" and "nature" unclear, unstable, and intact.

To understand what the young Heidegger takes to really matter in Dilthey, it is not necessary to directly oppose these standard readings—as if there were something inherently wrong with measuring Dilthey in terms



of his place in the philosophical tradition, or with analyzing the tensions among the methods, theories, and implied positions one can extract from his writings. I note in passing, however, that all such readings—by focusing on something like “Dilthey’s philosophy” and treating him in terms of his claims, accomplishments, limitations, influence, etc.—encourage us to treat him as a historical figure, somebody with whom we are ready to settle accounts, and not somebody whose thinking we wish to carry further. Heidegger is clearly not ready to treat Dilthey as a historical figure. He thinks that what is really important in Dilthey is the tasks he leaves open and unfinished for us, not any positive theories and methods he allegedly lays down for us to either affirm or reject.

Heidegger therefore begins by directing attention to a “basic tendency” that informs all of Dilthey’s works?<sup>30</sup> He argues that unlike Husserl, Dilthey is not interested redeploying the old ideas of “persons” and their “psychic-historical structure”; instead, he is moving toward the more “substantial” task of “disclosing a new horizon for the question . . . in the broadest sense” of our very being.<sup>31</sup> It is this “new horizon” that Heidegger thinks is intimated in Dilthey’s late talk about the wider hermeneutical implications of starting from the standpoint of life and in terms of the philosophical *Selbstbesinnung* through which these implications might be considered. For

the problem of the human sciences is not a separate [epistemological or regionally ontological] problem but the expression (*Ausdruck*) of an ultimate philosophical motive: to interpret life from out of itself, primordially. (GA 59:154 [119])

It is impossible not to notice that this was already Dilthey’s voice before it could become Heidegger’s. In his early lecture courses, Heidegger frequently discusses the proper orientation in philosophy in terms of its being “motivated” out of life itself, and in SZ, in his analysis of historicity, he will thus correctly say that he is “appropriating Dilthey’s labors . . . confirmed and strengthened by the theses of Count Yorck.”<sup>32</sup> Such an appropriation requires that he actually start from the implicit goal towards which all of Dilthey’s work seems to be on the way, as he saw that goal at least as early as 1919.<sup>33</sup>

So, how much credit for the deeper, phenomenological implications of his thought should we give to Dilthey himself? How post-Cartesian really is his notion of a specifically philosophical *Selbstbesinnung*? How mindful is he of the ontological implications of his suggestion that both understanding historical life and explaining nature are lived-through possibilities? I believe that the more one sees of Dilthey’s writings, and the more one reads them together with Heidegger’s early Freiburg lecture courses, the more proto-Heideggerian they appear. For example, on the issue of *Selbstbesinnung*, in Dilthey’s drafts for the second volume of the *Einleitung* (especially the “Breslau Draft,” c. 1882), the *Selbstbesinnung* through which the difference between the modes of knowledge characteristic of the natural and human



sciences is discovered is said to be both theoretical and practical and also to involve a kind of “prescientific *Wissen* or immediate knowledge” that grows out of an “*Innewerden*” that is “implicit in everyday consciousness and verbal usage” (GS 19:61/SW 1:248). Dilthey sees that in a certain sense, then, because the natural sciences build explanatory constructions on the basis of experienced historical life, while the human sciences attempt to understand that life in its own terms, the latter are “less derivative” than the former. As Makkreel observes, “with his account of [*Innewerden*] as a prereflective mode giving access to the full reality of the context of life (*Lebenszusammenhang*), Dilthey is, in effect, opening up the domain of prescientific phenomenological description later explored by Husserl and Heidegger.”<sup>34</sup>

In any case, no commentary in terms of Dilthey’s “anticipations” and “influence,” no matter how generous, can by itself stir an *appropriation*, an *Aneignung*, of Dilthey’s work. One makes judgments about anticipations and influences the same way one analyzes claims and theories—in the third person, as a properly detached observer. By contrast, in German as in English, an *Aneignung* or appropriation is the taking of something as one’s own, where “taking” is as much a matter of taking up and taking further as it is a matter of taking over and continuing what has already come to be.

Heidegger’s treatment of Dilthey, then, is impeccably appropriative. Granted that Dilthey never *says* that “philosophy ought to take its bearings from the standpoint of life” and indeed rarely *utilizes* this standpoint for purposes he explicitly acknowledges to be external to his original epistemic ones; nevertheless, his work itself *shows* that this can (and even on its own terms ought to) be done. As Heidegger will later conceive his approach in SZ, his interpretation is both phenomenological—that is, responsive to what shows itself, with as little interference from “what one usually says and does about such things” as possible—but also necessarily hermeneutical—that is, as self-honest as possible about the powerful draw that “what one usually says . . .” always is anyway. Behind this sense of phenomenology, which grows out of the “experiencing of experience, where one does not yet find either something “psychical” or something “physical” but rather only the “process of life as an eventuation” (GA 56/57, 75–76, 92–94/63–64, 77–79)—that is, behind all of these negative descriptions and critiques of Natorp and others lies Dilthey’s notion of *Selbstbesinnung*, the studied self-awareness of how experiencing happens. And as we will see in Chapter 7, by 1927 Heidegger has been considering this awareness and character of its relation to lived experience in Diltheyan terms for almost a decade.

We may note at least in passing that one consequence of less appropriative efforts at reading Dilthey is that they often have the effect of making later (in this case, especially German) thinkers look too good. Thus, for example, when Dilthey’s earlier anti-naturalistic “descriptive and analytical psychology” of inwardly experienced life is juxtaposed with his later emphasis on the “objective apprehension” of life expressions and both are treated strictly as epistemic gestures, he is easy to reduce to a relatively two-dimensional



figure who, having once been inspired by psychological subjectivism, succumbs later to positivist objectivism, and thus never succeeds in developing the sort of genuinely human-scientific epistemology that *we*—looking back self-confidently with our knowledge that what philosophy Really Does is now obvious—can go on to formulate. Husserl, as I have already explained, is probably the most famous beneficiary of this sort of ungenerous reading of Dilthey's accomplishments.<sup>35</sup>

To Heidegger, in contrast, Dilthey's writings—especially insofar as they are expressive of his struggle to articulate the standpoint of experienced historical life itself—offer guidance for further consideration of precisely this struggle, yet in such a way that repeating the usual and traditional lines of thought is not encouraged. In the early Freiburg years, Heidegger interprets this “guiding” (directing, prefiguring, fore-conceiving) of inquiry as, on the one hand, showing us how to avoid “theoretically determining”—that is, objectifying, categorizing, prejudicing, de-vivifying (*entleben*)—its content or findings and as, on the other hand, requiring the development of special “categories of life” that are “founded in life itself” (GS 19, 361), hermeneutically phenomenological concepts the Heidegger calls “formal indications” (*formale Anzeigen*).<sup>36</sup> What we see here is that in Dilthey the young Heidegger recognizes a pioneering effort to take seriously, specifically as this is relevant for doing philosophy, the suggestion that *all* thinking originates in and speaks out from its directly lived, factual situation. “Formal indication” is Heidegger's first attempt to spell out how this suggestion should be discussed. Its basic aim is twofold—namely, to steer us away from all the from traditional distortions, misconceptions, and selective representations of phenomena, and precisely in the process of doing this, also guide us toward a transformative perception of how phenomena are there-for and given-to us in their own being, no matter how we might then go on to conceptually capture them for some specific purpose or in light of some specific methodology.<sup>37</sup>

In WS 1919–20, Dilthey's famous triad of lived experience-understanding-expression already plays a formally indicative role in Heidegger's efforts to characterize historical life as “phenomenology's domain of origin” (GA 58:169/129). In fact, says Heidegger the following summer, Dilthey shows us how “lived experience as such already has a certain sort of [pre-theoretical] rationality” of its own; indeed he “already thinks lived experience *as understanding*,” that is, as descriptive of our ontological condition, not merely as one possible method of study originating in this condition (GA 59:163/125, my emphasis). In other words, Dilthey “sees a new reality,” a whole life process—that is, our existential condition as Heidegger will ultimately go on to explicate it in SZ—and not just a new domain to be handled by a second kind of scientific practice. However, we mostly look in vain for Dilthey's own “expansion on what is seen” (GA 59:164/126).

Take, for example, Dilthey's critique of naturalistic psychology. It is plain enough that in his struggle to produce a “descriptive and analytical”



alternative, Dilthey is not just moving epistemically and polemically away from an explanatory sort of natural science toward a human science of understanding, but is instead and more radically, setting the stage for the development of an utterly transformed sort of psychological (if one can still call it that) grounding-discipline might actually be turned into something like phenomenological philosophy's own pre-science (*Vorwissenschaft*).<sup>38</sup> For unlike the naturalistic psychology Dilthey rejects, his alternative focuses on how it is to "be" historical, such that both natural and human science are possible; and, Heidegger observes, this is asserted by someone who seems clearly aware that his own thinking originates in and speaks out from precisely this situation.<sup>39</sup> But where is the account of *this origination*?

With all the information we now have about Heidegger's early years, it is possible to appreciate how deeply considered SZ's idea of appropriating Dilthey really is. The Freiburg lecture courses show quite clearly that Heidegger is working out the problem of how to approach his Being-question with more help from the "researches of Dilthey" than from anyone else including Husserl. Thus in DD, the first systematic account of the basic themes and structures of SZ's two published Divisions, Heidegger decisively frames his project by affirming the historical-factual origin of all ontological investigation, and it is Dilthey who gets credit for opening the path to the proper interpretation of this determinate origin. In both GA 20 and in SZ, it is Dilthey—not Brentano, or Scheler, or Husserl, or anyone else "in the whole personalistic movement"—whom Heidegger credits with moving beyond a mostly theoretical upgrading of the old ideas of "persons" or of traditional epistemic inquiry to the really "substantial" point of "disclosing a new horizon for the question. . . . *in the broadest sense*, of the being of man."<sup>40</sup> And Heidegger mean "broadest" here in his own double sense. For only in Dilthey's work, he asserts, does a concern for human being at the same time point in the direction of the Being-question itself. As Heidegger puts it in an atypically confessional passage,

[M]y guess is that even though Dilthey did not raise the Being-question and did not even have the means to do so, the tendency to do so was alive in him. Since Dilthey's formulations are very indefinite precisely in the dimension of fundamental phenomena, it is impossible to document the presence of this tendency objectively.<sup>41</sup>

But then precisely how is the tendency to raise the Being-question "alive" in Dilthey? The answer, I think, has two parts.

First, there is the familiar part already discussed above. Reading Dilthey shows us *why* epistemological questions cannot be fundamental. Dilthey's lifelong conviction was that "the solid anchor for my thoughts [lies] exclusively in inner experience, in the facts of consciousness" (GS 1:xvii/ SW 1:49). In spite of the psychologistic language, in following out this conviction,



Dilthey directs us to the question of *how* life “is” for us when understood as directly experienced, instead of *what* it looks like as an object theoretically constituted from the “Cartesian” standpoint shared by natural science and traditional epistemology.

In short, Dilthey shows Heidegger that understanding life and explaining nature go with two different modes of human existence; and Dilthey’s turn toward the former is thus a source of inspiration for Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein*. Yet this familiar story is also superficial. Like the descriptions of SZ that call it a radicalization of Husserl’s transcendental philosophy, this story depicts Heidegger’s appropriation of Dilthey *as* a creative use of the latter’s “return to life” without explaining *how* he could or *why* he would think its radicalization is the next step. The story, then, must have a second part, which the earliest lecture courses clearly recognize.

What Heidegger ultimately sees in Dilthey’s labors is a twofold ontological promise. First and more narrowly, in defending human science against naturalistic reduction, Dilthey is driven toward depicting the immediate experiential possession of life as the *site of differentiation between the two types of science*. As already mentioned, Dilthey himself discusses at least some of the radical philosophical implications of this move. Negatively, because he knows that the basic distinction between natural and human science goes deeper than method, he could see that the theoretical consciousness required in the natural sciences is not “philosophically basic” and thus cannot in principle define the standpoint from which the distinction is drawn. Constructively, Dilthey also sees clearly why the issue of *Erklären* versus *Verstehen* must be handled from the standpoint of life; for the proper characterization of either operation requires that we become aware of and consider it as an “aspect of the real life process”—that is, as a possibility emergent from the direct, unmediated “having” of life in its experientially lived-through coherence (*Erlebniszusammenhang*). This is the ultimate implication of understanding natural scientific theories to be expressions or manifestations of life.

Second and more broadly, however, there is the question of the full implications of the project Dilthey was in the process of carrying out. For (a) what his polemics against neo-Kantian philosophy of science actually show is that a lot of epistemic analysis is being conducted from a very “unphenomenological” standpoint. No matter how sophisticated the analysis or how generous-spirited the analyst, it is not possible to appreciate properly what human-scientific understanding accomplishes, so long as this operation is viewed under the assumption that to “be” any kind of thinker at all means to be an objective thinker. Yet (b) if Dilthey’s constructive alternative—that is, his return to the standpoint of lived experience—actually undermines this traditional assumption and at the same time makes his own chosen dual-scientific differentiation possible, then something like this orientation already suggests itself as that “philosophically basic” standpoint which traditional epistemology fails to establish.



To Heidegger, then, whatever Dilthey's original and stated epistemic aim, when he constructs the means for accomplishing this aim by moving toward the question of life, its experiential standpoint, and a treatment of it in terms of itself, what he actually uncovers is the philosophically suitable *site of differentiations among possible modes of being* "generally." The next step, therefore, is to make this ontological "tendency" in Dilthey's writings explicit by following out what is already formally indicated there.

Thus at first, Heidegger uses Dilthey's analysis of *Erlebnis* straightforwardly to make *one* point—namely, that philosophy, too, must understand itself as originating out of factual life.<sup>42</sup> But by 1925, this notion of philosophical origination has been rethought in such a way that Dilthey's analysis of *Erlebnis* is now said to underscore *two* "fundamentally neglected questions of phenomenological investigation in its formative [i.e., Husserlian] period." There is "on the one hand, the question of the being of this specific entity" that we are—a question Husserl still unfortunately treats entirely in terms of consciousness, its "acts," its "intentional comportment, and all that is given with it." On the other hand, there is "the question of the meaning of Being itself"—which is made all the more pressing because of Husserl's leading assumption that "categorially primal separations" between various meanings of reality are all traceable to this specific entity's "conscious" life (GA 20:158–59/114–15). Unfortunately, Husserl is so busy defending his research program against naturalism that he "fundamentally neglects" both questions.

In contrast, and because his hermeneutical tendencies point away from such neglect, what Dilthey's polemics against traditional philosophy of science really show is that, specifically naturalistic or not, its very approach is self-deceived. No matter how sophisticated the epistemic inquiry or how generous-spirited the epistemologist, it is impossible to appreciate what EITHER human-scientific understanding OR natural scientific explanation is or how it operates, so long as these operations are cognized under the assumption that "being" a philosopher means thinking objectivistically or from Nowhere, and thus "having" one's subject matter as objects for a properly self-possessed consciousness. As I argued in Part I, the reason for this confusion simple to state, but in these times hard to accept. In fact, neither *Erklären* nor *Verstehen*, nor any analysis of them is ever from Nowhere. For Heidegger, this is Dilthey's most important achievement—uncovering the fact that no philosophical outlook, not even the most rigorously prepared and "objective," ever actually achieves the Cartesian or God's-eye viewpoint.<sup>43</sup>

## FROM THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY TO THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL LIFE: NOW WHAT?

All of this indicates something of what Heidegger claims is "alive" in Dilthey, but how are we to understand Heidegger's further claim that



Dilthey himself could never ask about his “hermeneutical tendencies” because he “lacked the means” for doing so? For Heidegger, the basic reason is that Dilthey never makes an explicit worry out of the fact that *his own research* takes shape within the general atmosphere of traditional epistemology—that his philosophizing, too, is an “enactment.” As a result, he never notices how his work, too, is affected—at times, even corrupted—by its sheer occurrence at a time when everything tends automatically to get interpreted as either a “present object” or a “present subject and knower of objects.” At least this much, however, is already clear. When it comes to the question of appropriating Dilthey, we must begin by from the recognition that he failed to actually ground his project hermeneutically—that is, to trace all his concern for methods and subject matters back to the very context of active factual-historical involvement that his work describes and to speak “from” this involvement about these methods and subject matters. Yet for Heidegger, this simply means we must take our cue from his *research* rather than from *him*.

Before we can discuss how Heidegger did so, however, we must pause to reconsider the whole matter, as he did, from another angle. In Dilthey’s late notes for his Critique of Historical Reason, there appears a passage that informs us as follows:

Temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) is contained in life as its first categorical determination and the one that is fundamental for all the others. The expression “passage of life” already points to this temporality. Time (*Zeit*) is there for us, by means of (*vermöge*) the gathering unity of our consciousness. (GS 7:192–93/SW 3:214–15)

The passage—which the young Heidegger probably did not see (the notes were first published in 1926)—nevertheless confirms in still another way the proto-Heideggerian character of Dilthey’s researches. No one who has read his descriptions of the experience of historical life—especially those written between 1905 and 1911—will be surprised by this passage, or by Dilthey’s insistence that life is in fact experienced as a concrete temporalizing. But as Heidegger sees, and Dilthey’s friend Yorck continually complained, nothing philosophically explicit is made of this obviously crucial understanding of “how” life is for us when it is reflected upon as lived through instead of conceptually reconstituted in terms of its allegedly “essential structures.” It is a central aspect of Heidegger’s appropriation of Dilthey’s work that it takes Yorck’s complaint seriously, and because it does, the problem of history becomes the “pre-philosophical problem of how it is to ‘be’ historical,” considered hermeneutically and in terms of the proper sense of temporality. However, before we can thus “appropriate Dilthey’s labors strengthened by Yorck’s theses,” as Heidegger puts it, we need to consider Nietzsche’s *Advantage and Disadvantages of Historical Science for Life*. For in this, the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, we will find (provided that we read him as we have been reading Dilthey) that he “understood more than he could



tell us” (SZ, 396)—both about historicity as “concrete temporalizing” and about how to turn Dilthey’s standpoint of life into the philosophical attitude from which this temporalizing can be properly discussed.

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., Thomas Uebel, “Opposition to *Verstehen* in Orthodox Logical Empiricism,” in *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen*, ed. Uljana Feest (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 291–309.
2. See, perhaps most famously, Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Intellectual Impostures*, 2nd rev. ed. (1997; London: Profile Books, 2003); Steven Weinberg, *Facing Up: Science and Its Cultural Adversaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and the collections edited by Noretta Koertge, *Scientific Values and Civic Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science*, new ed. (1998; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a recent account of how deeply political the philosophy of science initially seemed to the logical empiricists, and ironically how their increasingly strident defense of objectivism just happened to help them stay out of political hot water during the McCarthy era, see George A. Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science: To the Icy Slopes of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also n. 3.
3. In *Cold War*, Reisch argues plausibly that the McCarthyism which was rampant in the United States at the time of the immigration of numerous logical empiricists encouraged their silence about the public, political, and value-expressive dimension of “the scientific view of the world” so clearly stated in the logical empiricist “manifesto” of 1929 (Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn, “The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle,” in *Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. M. Neurath and R. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), 1–20). However, Reisch tends to overstate the point by identifying this dimension with the “sentiment” described in the Manifesto, so that he can say that the Unity of Science Movement “died because its methods, values, and goals were broadly sympathetic to Socialism at a time when America and its colleges and universities were being scrubbed clean of red or pink elements” (“From ‘the Life of the Present’ to the ‘Icy Slopes of Logic’: Logical Empiricism, the Unity of Science Movement, and the Cold War,” in *Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism*, ed. Alan Richardson and Thomas Uebel [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 60). As I am arguing here, the logical empiricist worldview is not just a “set of ideas” prominent in a “movement” that one might decide to suppress in bad times and resurrect in better ones. Rather, the Unity of Science Movement is itself expressive of the vital philosophical understanding that *constitutes* logical empiricism, and its suppression has more to do with its members’ own self-understanding, according to which the question of how it is to “be” a philosopher belongs to social science not philosophy. With this assumption in place, there is no need to consider the question even in good times.
4. “Understanding in Human Science,” *Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980): 26. It goes without saying that this story does not satisfy very many Continental philosophers.



5. On the Cold War politics that infected much of the argument over the Unity of Science movement, see Reisch, *Cold War*, esp. 369–88. Cf. Michael Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), who argues in a different vein that, at least in the case of Carnap, Schlick, and Reichenbach, one must explain their differences primarily in terms of their varying reactions to German (readers need to add, specifically Marburg) neo-Kantianism (e.g., xvi, 232–33).
6. See, e.g., John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practice Matters: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and *Engaging Science: How to Understand Its Practices Philosophically* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
7. See, e.g., the two special issues on French and German *Continental Philosophy and the Sciences* in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 10, nos. 1–2 (2005); and Martin Eger, *Science, Understanding, and Justice* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).
8. On this distinction specifically and on Windelband and Rickert generally, see Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 186–97, 303–10; and H.A. Hodges, *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 225–48.
9. E.g., GS 1:xvii, 359–73/49, 192–206. The question of “reflective access” to immediate experience is discussed at length in Chapter 7.
10. This remains true, even if Dilthey’s conception of natural scientific explanation is dated, or his conception of the human sciences is insufficiently developed to distinguish between what we now see humanities-oriented sciences like history and the social and cultural sciences. For a discussion of these distinctions, together with a recommendation that Ernst Cassirer be reintroduced into the conversation, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, “Wilhelm Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians: On the Conceptual Distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Kulturwissenschaften*,” in *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Sebastian Luft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 253–71.
11. I am pushing Dilthey in Heidegger’s direction by making these thoughts more explicit and systematic than they are in Dilthey’s writings. In this regard, I am anticipating my later discussion, in Chapter 7, of the influence of Yorck’s constant prodding to make more of his friend Dilthey’s evident move away from a “merely ontic” (i.e., naturalistic) understanding of what science can know. In my view, although it is Heidegger that capitalizes on the implications of this prodding, it did have the effect of making at least the later Dilthey increasingly sensitive to the question of “who” philosophizes about science if it cannot be a “spectator.” For discussion of Yorck’s influence on Dilthey, see Hans Ruin, “Yorck von Wartenburg and the Problem of Historical Existence,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 25, no. 2 (1994): 111–30.
12. GS 7:205–206; cf. 227/226–27; cf. 247. This volume contains all of the notes for Dilthey’s unfinished Critique of Historical Reason. It is worth mentioning, then, that the recent postpositivist search for “normativity” in life tends to presuppose hidden “norms” somehow buried in it that are now being unearthed by analysis. For Dilthey, life’s basic “sense” is of a different order.



13. GS 7:206/27. There are complications here that I must ignore. Of course, in a certain sense, we *do* want to know the “origin” of particular scientific explanations—viz., in the sense that we want to be able to retrace the process by which their logical and empirical content came to be part of the actual theoretical claims we make. Otherwise, we could not test their degree of “representativeness.” What Dilthey means, however, is that this is the only sort of “origin” we are permitted to consider, not the sort that would tell us more generally how we came to be concerned so exclusively with predictability, or with obtaining knowledge that gives us power, or to prefer this sort of knowledge to human understanding or to wisdom.
14. Although Dilthey does defend the possibility of a human scientific understanding of natural scientific practice, unlike the social constructivists he is not at all tempted to (a) substitute this socio-historical account for the positivists’ formal-logical one, or to (b) conceive of his analysis of the nature of the practice is fundamentally causal. As I explain shortly, Dilthey really does not fully address this issue—one which, as Husserl and Heidegger both saw, cannot be resolved by epistemological or meta-scientific means alone.
15. It is interesting to note that Comte, the original positivist, treats the reductive-formalistic tendency in natural science more astutely. He argues that this is a fully defensible tendency, but only as long as one (i) never “forgets” that, like all conceptualization to some extent, it *is* reductive and formalistic, and (ii) refrains from being so impressed by the ease with which conceptualized phenomena can be arranged in theoretical systems that one comes to believe that the scientific method *as such* should be formalized. See my “Comte and the Possibility of a Hermeneutics of Science,” in *Hermeneutic Philosophy of Science, Van Gogh’s Eyes, and God: Essays in Honor of Patrick A. Heelan*, S.J., ed. Babette Babich (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 117–26.
16. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 8–9. Nevertheless, as Ricoeur’s focus on Dilthey’s *work* suggests, my phrasing here is probably somewhat too generous to Dilthey himself—formulated as it deliberately is to frame it as an anticipation, as Heidegger acknowledges, of his own notion of being-in-the-world. See KL, esp. 162–65; and GA 59:149–74, 197–98/115–33, 152–53; but cf. GA 63:14/11, where Dilthey is said to have had “little clarity” concerning the fundamental principles involved in furthering this aspect of his thought. See also notes 17 and 19.
17. See, e.g., GS 1:384–85/217. Dilthey calls the historical process by which metaphysics developed and was eventually displaced, first by natural science and now also by human science, the “euthanasia of metaphysics,” and it is the main topic of Book II of his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (GS 1:121–408 [most of which is omitted from the Makkreel-Rodi English edition; complete edition, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History*, trans. Ramon J. Betanzos (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 149–324]). His argument turns on the claim that Kant’s analysis of the displacement of the metaphysics of nature is essentially correct, but that his silence on the demise of the metaphysics of human life leaves the door open to a positivistic rejection of the human sciences. For more details about Book II, see Jos de Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey’s Hermeneutics of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 263–68.
18. GS 7:217–18/238. The English translators make it for us easier to remain satisfied with the more familiar, narrowed construal by translating “*allgemeinen erkenntnistheoretische Aufgabe*” as “the epistemological task.”



It is more difficult to maintain the narrower interpretation after reading the numerous exchanges on the “general” epistemological significance of hermeneutics in the correspondence between Dilthey and Count Yorck in *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm Dilthey und dem Grafen Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, 1877–1897*, ed. Erich Rothacker (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), e.g., 185–87. De Mul argues that Dilthey maintains until the end his adherence to initial and distinctively Kantian idea of a distinction between metaphysics as (pseudo-)science and the “meta-physical aspect of our life as [the] personal experience” of not being bound by the natural and historical conditions that shape us (GS 1:384/218), and he cites as evidence the fact that his theory of “worldviews” is one of his last finished works (*Tragedy of Finitude*, 269–72). Even if this is correct, however, it does not follow that Dilthey’s general philosophical standpoint remains as Kantian and epistemological as it appears to be in his first formulations of what a “Critique of Historical Reason” would have to accomplish.

19. Dilthey’s idea of a *Selbstbesinnung* that seeks “the foundation for action as well as for thought” and that is wide enough to be philosophically concerned with “differentiating among the facts of consciousness as well as the articulations based on this differentiation” appears as early as the “Breslau Draft” (circa 1880) of what was to be Book 4, Section 1, of the *Einleitung*’s second volume (GS 19:79–80/SW1:268).
20. Heidegger is already discussing this matter in his early Freiburg lectures, as I summarize in context of commenting on Dilthey in sections 6 and 7 below, and again in light of Heidegger’s “appropriation” of Dilthey for his own purposes in Chapter 7. Together these discussions constitute an expansion of my earlier study, “Heidegger’s ‘Appropriation’ of Dilthey before *Being and Time*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (1997): 105–128. On the following, see also, István Fehér, “The Early Heidegger. Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, *Lebensphilosophie* on His Way to *Being And Time*: The Confrontation with Husserl, Dilthey, and Jaspers,” *Existential: An International Journal of Philosophy* (Hungary) 2 (1992): 69–96. Just when Husserl began to think through this issue, and how much his analysis owes to Heidegger, is still hotly contested. The place to start is Ludwig Landgrebe, “Das Problem der Geschichtlichkeit des Lebens und die Phänomenologie Husserls,” in *Phänomenologie und Geschichte* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1968), ch. 1. See also, Donn Welton, *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 325–26, and references cited there.
21. See, most famously, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” PRS, 168–69, 186–87. For Husserl’s earlier reactions to Dilthey, see the introduction to PRS (by Peter McCormick) and the translator’s preface to the English selections from the Husserl-Dilthey correspondence (by Jeffner Allen) in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, 161–65, 198–202. For the later reactions, see Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928–1938* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 319–23.
22. See, e.g., Bob Sandmeyer, *Husserl’s Constitutive Phenomenology: Its Problem and Promise* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), 40–67; and de Mul, *Tragedy*, 203–205.
23. Perhaps in the next few decades, as commentators work through the late manuscripts, a picture will emerge of a less Eurocentric, science-minded, and essentialist Husserl. In the meantime, it is the phenomenology that originates with his *Logos* article and the familiar critiques of the problems with this model of phenomenology on which I will focus here, for this is the



- “phenomenology” that has figured in post-phenomenological developments. For a recent review of these problems, paired provocatively with remarkably similar problems in Carnap, see Rouse, *How Scientific Practice Matters*, 28–76
24. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, Heidegger maintained this distinction throughout his life, insisting in the end that even if phenomenology is coming to an end as a “school of philosophy,” we must see that “in what is most its own phenomenology is not a school. It is the possibility of thinking, . . . of corresponding to the claim of what is to be thought” (GA 14:101/82).
  25. The reference here is to SZ, §7, but as we will see, Heidegger’s early lecture courses are full of passages in which the sentiment expressed in SZ as “phenomena must be treated phenomenologically” (27) is phrased in other preliminary ways—e.g., as involving a philosophical “attitude” or “tendency” that is different from objectivity.
  26. On the pre-SZ period generally, there is already a large and rapidly growing literature. On the “Dilthey connection” specifically, Kisiel, GHBT, esp. 100–105, 133–37, 321–26, 347–48, 524–25 n. 49, and “Das Entstehen des Begriffsfeldes ‘Faktizität’ im Frühwerk Heideggers,” *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 4 (1986–87): 91–120; John van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), esp. 146–47, 208–22, 278–79; Otto Pöggeler, “Heideggers Begegnung mit Dilthey,” *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 4 (1986–87): 121–59; Heribert Boeder, “Dilthey ‘und’ Heidegger. Zur Geschichtlichkeit des Menschen,” *Dilthey und der Wandel des Philosophiebegriffs seit dem 19. Jahrhundert (Phänomenologische Forschungen* 16), ed. E.W. Orth (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1984), 161–77; Charles R. Bambach, “Phenomenological Research as *Destruktion*: The Early Heidegger’s Reading of Dilthey,” *Philosophy Today* 37, no. 2 (1993): 115–32; and Hajime Tanabe’s early paper (1924), trans. from Japanese into German by Johannes Laube, “Die neue Wende in der Phänomenologie—Heideggers Phänomenologie des Lebens,” in *Japan und Heidegger: Gedenkschrift der Stadt Meßkirch zum hundertsten Geburtstag Martin Heideggers*, ed. Hartmut Buchner (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1989), 89–108.
  27. Heidegger’s WS 1923–24 lecture course, *Einführung in die Phänomenologische Forschung* (GA 17:91/67).
  28. Cited from one of the Berlin Academy volumes at GA 59:156/120. Cf. GA 12:121–22/34–36). This line of interpretation is recapitulated in several subsequent discussions, culminating in Heidegger’s 1925 Kassel lectures. Such thorough conceptualization so early is, in fact, not surprising. We now know that Heidegger was already reading Dilthey seriously in his student days, at least as early as 1909–10, when he developed the habit of hand-copying “detailed excerpts” from Dilthey’s writings (Letter to Karl Löwith, September 13, 1920, in Kisiel, GHBT, 100 n.43). Among these excerpts are two revealing chapters from the 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (hereafter *Einleitung*) on early Christianity and Augustine, which emphasize the “original Christian experience” and the rise of a “historical consciousness” that struggles to give expression to the “unfathomable living element at the heart of [its “factual,” religious] self-examination” in ways that the traditional language of objective cosmological categories cannot. See GS 1:250–67 [Betanzos, 228–39]; see also GHBT, 77, 100–108.
  29. See my “Displacing Epistemology: Being in the Midst of Technoscientific Practice,” *Foundations of Science* 16, nos. 2–3 (2011): 227–43. De Mul’s discussion of the reception of Dilthey’s work from pre-war Germany through



the English-speaking commentaries of the 1970s and 1980s is more nuanced and historically informative than my brief summary here (*Tragedy*, 40–51). My purpose is just to identify what is still the dominant judgment concerning how we should ultimately evaluate Dilthey's corpus—in order to highlight the fact that Heidegger was never interested in making such an evaluation, because he intends rather to “further” Dilthey's work at the expense of the positions from the standard evaluations are made. At the very end of his SS 1920 lecture course, Heidegger says that the only philosopher who sees the importance of this furthering is Jaspers, who is working in the right direction (his 1919 *Psychology of Worldviews* is cited) “without, however, [explicitly] seeing his way” because he does not realize that the task is really “only possible on the basis of Diltheyean intuitions” (GA 59:174/133).

30. “*Grundtendenz*” is the term that appears in the title of the first of the four sections of the “Dilthey Draft” [DD] for SZ—the seventy-five-page, never-published 1924 review of the Dilthey-Yorck correspondence, “The Concept of Time (Comments on the Dilthey-Yorck Correspondence),” containing verbatim a portion of SZ §77—as this appears in *Der Begriff der Zeit*, GA 64 (2004): 85–103/72–88. On DD, see GHBT, 315–57. Some editorial problems with this version of the DD manuscript need not concern us here (323 n. 7).
31. From, respectively, SZ, 46 and 398; and GA 20:164/118–19.
32. I refer, of course, to the famous opening line of SZ, §77, where Heidegger explains that his analysis of the problem of history (and the necessity of working it out in terms of Dasein's historicity) “has grown out of the appropriation [*Aneignung*] of Dilthey's labors” (SZ, 397). Cf. SZ, 72n. 403–404. What Heidegger means by this is discussed in Chapter 7.
33. Gadamer reports Heidegger telling him in 1923 how he carried home the “fat tomes” of the Berlin Academy containing some of Dilthey's late works, only to have to lug them back because somebody had requested something else, not written by Dilthey, from the same volumes. The important point of this story is that all of this tome-lugging had to be taking place well before 1920. See *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 23. In SS 1919, Heidegger is already praising Dilthey over the neo-Kantians (GA 56/57:121ff./103ff.). Cf. GA 59:149–50, 156, 169–70/115–16, 120, 129–30). Kisiel tells us that “in the closing minutes of SS 1920 [i.e., GA 59:173–74/133], ‘facticity’ is for the first time officially adopted from neo-Kantianism to name Heidegger's own ‘distressing’ topic” (GHBT, 116, also 136, 496–97). See also Kisiel, “Das Entstehen des Begriffsfeldes ‘Faktizität’ im Frühwerk Heideggers,” esp. 96ff.
34. Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 428–30; also SW I:6, 22, 26–27, 247 n.4). Makkreel even notes the specific importance of Dilthey's early influence on Heidegger's “reconception” of phenomenology as a hermeneutics of facticity (*Dilthey*, 429 n.7). For Makkreel, however, none of this justifies the claim that Dilthey is really “on the way toward the problem of life” in the sense of the larger Heideggerian ontological concerns. In another of his discussions of *Innewerden*, Makkreel stresses that for all its expansiveness in terms of topic and modality, Dilthey after all locates this process *in the body* (not in what Heidegger calls our “situated understanding”), and thus “comes closer to the way that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty locate consciousness in the body and distinguish between the body as lived and the body as objectified” (“The Overcoming of Linear Time in Kant, Dilthey, and Heidegger,” in *Dilthey and Phenomenology*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and John Scanlon



[Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987], 148 ). Makkreel's distinction threatens, I think, to obscure the fact that SZ's analyses of *Befindlichkeit* and *Verstehen* quite clearly regard existence as an embodied condition (but refuse to conceive this embodiment as something "inward" or located in something "observable"). More importantly, however, Heidegger interprets the issue Makkreel is discussing quite differently. For him, the question is not whether Dilthey had these ideas—e.g., whether in fact he ever "backslid" from his more phenomenological moments and described *Innewerden* as a process going on internally—but whether in the end, given the matters he was thinking through, it is unsurprising that the philosophically conscientious and basically phenomenological Dilthey grew dissatisfied with such ideas and returned in his last works to the standpoint of "*historische Bedingtheit*" that unmask these essentially Cartesian and Kantian ideas for the "constructions" they are (see, e.g., GA 59:154/119).

35. Though not the worst offender, Gadamer is certainly the next most famous. For discussion of his evaluation of Dilthey, see de Mul, 325–37. Others who read Dilthey ungenerously are Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 145–46, 177–81; and Karl-Otto Apel, *Understanding and Explanation: A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective*, trans. Georgia Warnke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 3–6, 12–14. For a much better treatment, with special reference to Dilthey's important 1905 discussion of "objective apprehension" in knowledge (GS 7:24–44/SW 3:45–66), see Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 207–209, 274–88.
36. See, above all, GA 60:56–65/38–45; also GA 59:3–9/1–5; GA 56/57:111–12/93–94; GA 9:10–11/9–10; and GA 61:79–83/61–63. In the last decade, a considerable literature on "formal indication" in Heidegger's early work has developed, and I will have some more to say about this notion in Chapter 7. See, e.g., *Rumor*, 324–41; GHBT, esp. 48–50, 164–70; Ryan Streeter, "Heidegger's Formal Indication: A Question of Method in *Being and Time*," *Continental Philosophy Review* 30, no. 4 (1997): 413–30; Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 74–75, and "Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1994): 779–90; Otto Pöggeler, "Heideggers logische Untersuchungen," in *Martin Heidegger: Innen- und Außenansichten*, ed. R. Blasche, et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 75–100; Th. C.W. Oudemans, "Heideggers 'logische Untersuchungen,'" *Heidegger Studies* 6 (1990): 85–95.
37. "The aim of formal indications is to lead us back to the genuine sense of life, not for the sake of comprehending or contemplating it, but as part of actually renewing that sense or, what is the same, living life in an original and authentic way" (Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *Heidegger's Concept of Truth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 242–52; 436–45, quotation, 248).
38. GA 58:88; cf. 27–38, 81–87, 104–10, and Oskar Becker's transcript, 223–63/70; cf. 22–30, 65–70, 83–87, and 168–98; cf. the 1919 Summer Semester lecture course, *Phänomenologie und Transzendente Wertphilosophie*, in *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, GA 56/57:164–65/139–40; and GA 59:168–74/129–33. Rudiments of SZ's fundamental ontology are clearly in evidence in this early discussion of a phenomenological "*Ursprungswissenschaft*" that must itself have a "*Vorwissenschaft*"; and in his lectures during this period, Heidegger frequently draws on Dilthey's triad in depicting philosophy's facticity and origination. So, e.g., in WS 1919–20, even though "we are still a long way from [SZ]. . . . this precursor to *Befindlichkeit-Verstehen-Rede* . . . will be telegraphed in the occasional allusion to the issue of 'how I originally find myself' in [this course's] culminating hours" (GHBT,



- 121). Cf. the crucial KNS, GA 56/57:112–17/95–99; GA 59 (§5c):36–38/26–28; and the review of Karl Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (GA 9:esp. 22–32/19–28).
39. In DD, this is “what” Heidegger identifies as Yorck’s concern with Dilthey’s psychology (GHBT, 325–26). “Inner” and “consciousness” are ontologically inadequate imagery here.
40. SZ, 398 and 46, my emphasis; and GA 20:163–64/118–19. GA 20 “displays its genetic credentials” as perhaps no other course in this period (GHBT, 362). Drawing extensively on GA 20 and KL, van Buren shows in detail how Heidegger, reading the Sixth Investigation of Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen* with Dilthey’s guidance, transforms Husserl’s “intentionally configured” phenomenology into SZ’s temporal-historical hermeneutic (*Rumor*, 204–19). On Heidegger’s distancing himself from Husserl (and to a much lesser extent, Brentano and Scheler) in GA 20, see also Kisiel, “En Route to *Sein und Zeit*,” *Research in Phenomenology* 10 (1980): 307–19.
41. GA 20:173–74/125. In SZ, this “guess” is replaced by a five-page explanation from the DD (§77, 399–403; GA 64:9–14/6–10) of the way Yorck “gives unambiguous expression to Dilthey’s ownmost philosophical tendency” (SZ, 398; cf. KL, 177).
42. See, e.g., KNS 1919 (GA 56/57:65–73, 115–17 [55–61, 97–99]) and WS 1919–20 (GA 56/57:81 [68–69]).
43. As I argue in Chap. 3, one of the best demonstrations of this being true is Descartes’ own *Meditations*. See also Robert C. Scharff, “On Failing To Be Cartesian: Reconsidering the ‘Impurity’ of Descartes’ Meditation,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 4 (2006): 475–504.



## 6 Nietzsche

### From the Scientific Problem of History to *Historie* as an Existential Problem

Who is Nietzsche? Anyone who seriously imagines settling this issue has not read very much of him or about him.<sup>1</sup> In any case, I attempt something much smaller here. I want to flesh out what seems implied by Dilthey's late remarks about the "temporality" of life and its standpoint, by reading them together with Nietzsche's UM2. Of course, this is the line of interpretation Heidegger tells us in SZ that he took himself, but my main aim is not to jump into SZ-scholarship with both feet.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I want to continue the line of inquiry begun in the previous chapter and compare "the problem of [the meaning and study of] history" as Dilthey leaves it and as Nietzsche takes it up. I believe that in the process, something of what Nietzsche "understands" about history but cannot "make known" to us, as Heidegger puts it, will emerge, and by the end of this chapter, we will have a preliminary sketch of the "concrete temporality," or historicity of Dasein that is developed in SZ. But in the meantime, there is more to be said about the contributions that Nietzsche makes to the issue of how it is to "be" historical. I will argue that especially UM2 can help us raise this issue in a philosophically more productive way—namely, by converting it from Dilthey's epistemically oriented question about how to be a human scientist to the more general question of how to be a philosopher in a "scientific" culture.

#### FROM DILTHEY TO NIETZSCHE

For all its philosophical promise—and given our every effort to understand him forward—the context for Dilthey's work remains defined from beginning to end in terms of his original epistemic sense of mission. In its initial form, his Critique of Historical Reason was designed to do for human science what Kant's first *Critique* does for natural science—that is, provide it with a (different) method and its own (second) conception of knowledge. Dilthey quickly realized, however, that this epistemological project must itself be grounded in a different ontology, and ultimately, in his final period he even appears to have recognized the need for a new philosophical "standpoint" from which the ontological possibilities



of not just the human but also natural science can both be worked out. At this point, however, Dilthey's original plan runs its course. Even if we grant him explicit insight into having achieved a standpoint from which one asks how to ontologically differentiate the sciences of humanity and nature *from each other*, the fact is he never tries to do this. He never asks, because he as a philosopher of the human sciences he sees no need to do so, about the *standpoint of life itself as a philosophical orientation*. He never turns the problem of history back on himself in critically reflective self-awareness (*Selbstbesinnung*), and so he never addresses, as a question in its own right, How is it (for me) to be the historically determinate arbiter of multiple ontological regions?

Yet if Dilthey never reflects on this issue, he does leave a clue concerning how others might do so. The standpoint of life, he says, precisely because it is the standpoint of historical life itself, has temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) as its "first categorical determination." This reference to "categories of life" gives us two points to think about. First, the kind of temporality that Dilthey has in mind here is what later came to be called "lived time," not time (*Zeit*) defined by Aristotle as the measure of movement with respect to before and after that has long been favored by the Western tradition, and of course deemed fundamental in the natural sciences. The very description of life as a process [*Lebensverlauf*], says Dilthey, already intimates how different this experiential sense of time is. Life is not lived "in" time, as if it were a span with segments marking off its earlier from its later moments (though of course it can be "measured" this way); rather we live temporally, "through" time.

Yet the fact that Dilthey feels constrained to talk about this lived time in a somewhat back-handed and defensive way—that is, in terms of its being the subject of "another" kind of categorization—gives us a second point to consider. In appealing to a non-standard kind of conceptualization, Dilthey acknowledges that *describing life as it is lived through* is currently discouraged in an era where the dominant understanding of knowledge depicts conceptualization of any phenomenon as something accomplished primarily by representations that select and order "mere" experiences in a way that is, so to speak, better than life. He understands himself to be carving out a new ontological space for the human sciences in the late nineteenth-century atmosphere of natural scientism, and with such a space comes the need for a new sort of conceptualization. Said carefully, then, Dilthey is making the critical, or even polemical point that the "first categorical determination of life" is not a concept in the usual sense, precisely because it is not a selective theoretical improvement, imposed on life from the outside. Historical life, he says, is something behind or above which we cannot conceptually go if our aim is to genuinely understand it "in its own terms." Whether the dominant philosophical tradition that shapes the epistemology of the natural sciences approves or not, categories of life are intended to be descriptive of what is "contained in life itself [*in dem Lebens . . . enthalten*]" in such a



way that our experience of temporality “determines the content of our lives in all directions.”<sup>3</sup>

Taking these two points together, we may depict Dilthey as leaving us with the task of further clarifying life’s temporality—but doing so within an unsympathetic, objectivistic and naturalistic atmosphere—by somehow learning to speak from within the experience of life itself rather than from a theoretically external and abstractly transcendental or “mathematical” standpoint (GS 7:193/215). As just explained, however, we cannot pursue this task by carrying Dilthey’s own train of thought forward, as if it were merely incomplete. For Dilthey ends, so to speak, facing away from the philosophical issue of explicating life’s standpoint itself *for non-scientific purposes*. Insofar as he considers how it is to “be” historical at all, it is entirely in connection with securing the best way to be a human scientist. He does not, for example, follow out the implications of his own discovery that the natural sciences are as much an expression of life as any human science. Hence he does not ask, What relation do the sciences—any sciences—have to “my own existence”? (Are there only two types of science? Do we have any say in this matter? Are different sciences related differently to the question of their “application”?) Moreover, he does not ask how his own attempt at an epistemological and ontological reformation of the idea of “science” is both furthered and hindered by the fact that he must make the attempt in the atmosphere of an already “[largely natural-]scientific” culture. Finally, he never asks whether the standpoint of life, understood philosophically instead of epistemologically, is really a “standpoint” at all—that is, something like an achieved and self-possessed outlook—rather than simply a label for the condition, to use his terms, of our always being in the midst of the historical “life process.” This last question is precisely the opening consideration in Nietzsche’s UM2. Looking back at this little essay today, we have ample reason to consider carefully what he says there about being historical. Yet once Nietzsche left the philological profession behind, he made it very clear that he did not share our current estimate of UM2’s importance. To profit fully from this work, we must start by understanding why.

## NIETZSCHE AMONG THE PHILOLOGISTS

Viewed in context, Nietzsche’s UM2 is as much an engagement with German classical philology as it is a self-standing philosophical essay.<sup>4</sup> Yet virtually from the beginning, Nietzsche assigns it a merely supporting role, not only in relation to his major work of the period (i.e., BT), but in relation to the other three “untimely meditations,” to say nothing of the unfinished fifth one (“We Philologists”). Of course, today UM2 possesses a much higher status, thanks in part to its topic and to its having been extensively treated in the meantime by Heidegger and by French philosophy



after 1960, but this development would not have had Nietzsche's blessing.<sup>5</sup> Bad enough that UM2 contains none of his "mature" doctrines; worse still in Nietzsche's retrospect, it reflects more than any other work of the period the "brash and youthful" attitude of an author still enamored of Schopenhauer and thus still comfortable with making "metaphysical" and philosophically "systematic" use of theoretical distinctions between science and art, Apollonian vs. Dionysian forms of life, "types" of history, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Hence after UM2's publication, Nietzsche rarely even refers to it, and when he does, his remarks are usually critical or even dismissive (e.g., he speaks of UM2 as being full of abortive efforts and premature claims that soon had to be "contradicted"). As early as 1877, he warns readers that he has already "abandoned the metaphysical-artistic views which essentially govern" his early works. In 1885, in planning a reissue of UM, he wrote new introductions for the other three meditations but not UM2.<sup>7</sup> And in the preface for volume two of *Human, All too Human*, he singles out UM2 for special disparagement, because "what I had to say [there] against the 'historical sickness' I said as one who had slowly and toilsomely learned to recover from it and was in no way prepared to give up 'history' thereafter because I had once suffered from it."<sup>8</sup> UM2 thus clearly displays an attitude that is obviously unacceptable to the "free spirit" who writes this preface in 1886, who takes his failure to "give up history" as a weakness, and who now says, "One should speak only when one may not stay silent; and then only of what one has *overcome*"—which is hardly the strategy followed by the "pessimistic" author of UM2, who is still in the midst of a slow and tiresome "recovery." For the later Nietzsche, then, what in retrospect applies to some degree to all his early writings applies with greatest force against UM2:

*Juvenilia.*

My old wisdom's A and O  
sounded here: what did I hear?  
Now it does not strike me so,  
just the tired Ah! and Oh!  
that youth inspired fills my ear.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Nietzsche is neither the first nor the last author to discourage us from reading their early writings—nor the first or last whose advice we should not take.<sup>10</sup> What is important in the case of UM2 is that we understand why he looks back on it so unkindly and what we miss if we simply accept Nietzsche's self-criticisms and move on to his later works. The quick answer is that we miss his reason—by which I mean his philosophical not merely his autobiographical motivation—for writing UM2 in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Looking only at what he actually says, it is probably true that more than any other work of this period, UM2 seems to be the product of wholly "rebellious" author, challenging the traditional and the



orthodox in an “utterly belligerent” fashion (EH, 112). In spite of its title, Nietzsche does in fact spend most of his time explaining how history can be a disadvantage to life—how, as he says, its excess threatens to make us sick. Yet this is not the note on which the essay starts or ends. Its early sections stress the possible advantages of history and speak in encouraging tones about how history might “serve” experienced life, and the very end of the last section expresses the “hope” that it may come to do so. This is not, in my view, a minor point. To take Nietzsche’s later word that UM2 is as piece of embarrassing juvenilia is to miss one of his most illuminating demonstrations of how knowledge and life might fit together rather than remain so thoroughly in tension that some third thing (e.g., art or sustained culture critique) must always be thrown in between them as mediator.

The point is easier to see if we first consider the more judicious and nuanced criticism Nietzsche makes of BT. In the preface to its 1886 edition, for example, he begins not with a critique of its hyper-philological failures (as he does with UM) but with a reaffirmation of the importance of what he *experienced* in those years and what is thus reflected in this work. One must understand, he says, that I had then just recently “got hold of something fearsome and dangerous”—a new [and untimely] problem, namely, “the problem of science itself, science grasped for the first time as something problematic and questionable,” not as something to be simply gloried in for its successes, as was usual for the era.<sup>12</sup> We must read this carefully to avoid a familiar misinterpretation. There is no sign here of Nietzsche’s allegedly anti-scientific attitude.<sup>13</sup> He does not say that science is the problem; he says that *his experience of science as something problematic* is a problem (BT, 6), and he calls it a “new” problem, an experience of something still experienced by others as unproblematic, even positive. Ten years later, his problem is still there, but its interpretation in BT—namely, as something whose problematic character might be brought to proper attention through a radical reinterpretation of Greek culture that stresses its Dionysian spirit over its Apollonian accomplishments—this initial interpretation, he says, now seems to him a naïve and even arrogant attempt to single-handedly bend the professional language and concepts of classical philology and traditional philosophy entirely to his purposes.

Not surprisingly, many readers take this self-criticism at face value. Nietzsche has moved on; a second period has started, different issues are before him, and a career in philology together with a concern for its methods and theories is now well behind him.<sup>14</sup> However, Heidegger and Gadamer have shown us that it is possible to read Nietzsche’s self-criticisms in a more illuminating way. For in these criticisms, he always distinguishes (a) his initial problematic experience from (b) his attempt to give voice to it.<sup>15</sup> As I recommended regarding Dilthey in the previous chapter, so also with Nietzsche here.<sup>16</sup> Both (a) and (b) should be kept in mind—that is, both what he experiences (and thus somehow already “understands”) and



his ways of trying to articulate it—for it is the former that guides his later retrospectives and allows him to say of earlier articulations that they now seem too pessimistic, or generous, or even (in the case of UM) “not yet [in] my voice.”

Note further the importance of the sheer fact that Nietzsche engaged in these critical reassessments. Not only does this mark him as philosophically more reflective than Dilthey about the unsatisfactory character of his earlier writings; it also shows him making explicit use of the distinction between (a) and (b) to do so. Most tellingly, it shows the care he takes to continually reaffirm the centrality of (a)—of “what” he was/is concerned about and still finds experientially problematic—even as he is criticizing every earlier manner of (b). It is tempting to make too little of this last observation, by pointing out how common this practice is in everyday affairs. Don’t we often find a better way to articulate our initial and not yet spoken sense of things, only after we have an articulation to look back on critically so as to see that what seemed at the time to be a responsive and satisfying articulation really is not? Isn’t one’s present need for a better articulation thus simply an integral part of the very process of living through life, in which every articulation of every experience is in hindsight likely to seem in need of improvement? The truth is, these questions are not rhetorical; nor is the answer to them an easy yes. In fact, in ordinary life we are usually too busy getting on with things to keep this interplay between experience and articulation in mind, and (what is more to Nietzsche’s point) modern pedagogy seems bent on training us to separate them—that is, persuading us to label our own experiences of things as “merely personal” and concentrate on what “one” can “legitimately” say about such experiences.

And here is Nietzsche’s “new problem.” What prompted him in BT to challenge (i.e., “see through the prism of art”) his philological colleagues’ standard account of Greek culture is not primarily this account itself, nor is it their taking pride in doing “scientific” research. Rather, his main complaint—that is, what makes their science or indeed any science like it seem truly “problematic” to him—is their apparent power to employ the imagery of science-like practice to persuade a whole generation of German youth to accept the objective/scientific outlook as the model of what it is to be “educated” and “mature.” Or, to put the point another way, we might say that for Nietzsche, Comte’s early nineteenth century dream of universal scientific education seemed to be coming to fruition in a late nineteenth century nightmare.<sup>17</sup> In Nietzsche’s view, this larger pedagogical effect of philological “science” seemed somehow to have come to be taken as inseparable from strictly professional practice, with the result that the whole of German culture seems saturated with the following unspoken precept: Study and revere the scientifically legitimized articulations of life (especially the ones deemed “classical”); distrust the value of your own private reactions to it; and thus learn to appreciate past greatness, to take pride in living in its shadow, and to ignore any merely subjective urge toward creativity. As



Nietzsche remarks, a scientific education and bourgeois uniformity go well together (UM2, 281/84).

Of course, to the “free spirit” who writes HAH, or the more “mature” author of the 1886 “Attempt at Self-Criticism” for BT’s second edition, BT and UM—in their strategies and in their expressed views—cannot help but appear as works of a naively youthful and still tradition-bound quasi-scholar prone to rebellious excesses. Yet the more seasoned and independent spirit who looks back at these works continues to pursue the same original, if now somewhat differently understood problem (i.e., the problem, as UM2 says, of being “burdened” with having born into a scientific culture). Above all, Nietzsche says in 1886, it was and still is for me a matter of “the problem *that* a problem exists here” (BT, 6). It is precisely his continuing to be gripped by this problem that allows him to see that BT’s reinterpretation of Greek culture is still too directly “constructed . . . from precocious, wet-behind-the-ears, [merely] personal experiences,” with nothing more to fight with than some forced improvisations of the standard tools of philological science and of a philosophical tradition that is generally tone-deaf about art. The nerve of it, he says! As if I had or could ever have had enough command of either art or science to bend them toward my will-to-metaphor—like a Socrates trying to write music!<sup>18</sup>

This image of a Socrates who cannot write music could only occur to a thinker who is still living through a problem he has not yet articulated to his satisfaction. This Socrates is, of course, BT’s Platonic Socrates, the “third deity” along with Dionysus and Apollo. He is the founder of the Western tradition, a lover of theoretical abstractions whose search for knowledge takes the form of a demand for logical consistency, a preference for what is timeless and universal, and a search for essential definitions. He is the teacher in whose name Plato burned all his early poetry in order to become his student, and thus the source of that very urge to metaphysics that is now culminating in the “science” Nietzsche experiences problematically. In the *Phaedo* passage Nietzsche cites, Socrates explains that he only tried to write some music in order to “clear up” what his dreams meant. However, Nietzsche cites this passage not primarily to complain about the influence of Socratic intellectualism—that is, to view Socrates “as a disintegrative, negative force”—but instead to promote a very un-Platonic point:

Although it is certain that the first effect which the Socratic drive aimed to achieve was the disintegration of Dionysiac tragedy, a profound experience in Socrates’ own life compels us to ask whether the relationship between Socrates and art is *necessarily* and exclusively antithetical, and whether the birth of an “artistic Socrates” is something inherently contradictory. (BT, 70–71, author’s emphasis)

Let us suppose, suggests Nietzsche, that the figure in Socrates’ dream who repeatedly urges him to make music is really a warning, something akin to



his *daemonion*, who in this case is stirring “scruples in him about the limits of logical nature,” thus providing “a profound experience” through which Socrates can tell himself that

perhaps the things which I do not understand are not automatically unreasonable. Perhaps there is a kingdom of wisdom from which the logician is banished? Perhaps art may even be a necessary correlative and supplement of science? (BT, 71)

One can easily imagine Nietzsche’s philological colleagues eagerly jumping in here to correct him, displaying their superior scholarly skill in finding all the passages that demonstrate how “speculative” his reading of *Phaedo*, 60a-f, really is. In other words, it is easy to see how those who have mastered the Greek text will have been trained to miss Nietzsche’s point. To begin with, the autobiographical intimations should be obvious. Indeed, some commentators have even suggested that, far from being a contradictory idea, there may ultimately be no better label for Nietzsche himself than that of an aspiring “artistic Socrates” (BT, 71, also 15, 17, a figure who—unlike the advocate of an “aesthetic Socratism” that holds that in order to be beautiful, something must be reasonable, and that everything good must be “consciously” so (BT, 62, 64)—is not really averse to aesthetic modes but instead employs them for the unorthodox purpose of enhancing and articulating the untried possibilities of life rather than continuing the quest for further knowledge of what already is and has been.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche sees the “wisdom” of this would-be “philosopher of life” in the interventions of Socrates’ divine guide, for

whenever it appears, [it] *warns* him to *desist*. In this utterly abnormal nature the wisdom of instinct only manifests itself in order to *block* conscious understanding from time to time. Whereas in the case of all productive people instinct is precisely the creative-affirmative force and consciousness makes critical and warning gestures, in the case of Socrates, by contrast, instinct becomes the critic and consciousness the creator—a true monstrosity *per defectum* [through its lack]. (BT, 66, author’s emphasis)

What is “abnormal” about Socrates—and what leads to the scientific “sickness” in our own age—is that in him, the roles of experience and conscious articulation function “unnaturally” and in reverse. In “creative people” (and to a lesser extent, we might perhaps add, in all of us when we are speaking from the heart, or trying to say what we mean in our native languages without speaking in clichés), an inspiring/troublesome/puzzling or otherwise stimulating experience (here called “the wisdom of instinct” that, we will see, becomes “the unhistorical element” in life in UM2) comes to expression and is enacted under the critical guidance of our “knowledge”



of the circumstances under which this experience might best be effectively “affirmed” through articulation. But in Plato’s Socrates, the experiential source of what is vital and potentially creative in human existence is only allowed expression when his universal-truth-seeking Mind is taking an especially “unwise” direction. (Hence, it may be *accurate* to say that Socrates’ voice is silent during his trial because he is being “true” to the love of wisdom, but it does not follow that this makes Socrates’ theoretically clear-headed story of the worthlessness of human wisdom the best and most appropriate way to express the “wisdom of instinct.”)

It would be a mistake, however, to dwell on Nietzsche’s depiction of this reversal itself, or perhaps to imagine him struggling to work out some sort of balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in an age that prefers the former. We should consider instead what could have prompted him to ask about a musical Socrates. Indeed, this is precisely what Nietzsche’s own retrospective recommends. Granted that BT attempts to “look at science through the prism of art”—that is, starts from the outlook that is the very opposite from the outlook one usually privileges in a scientific age. Yet the full sentence (with Nietzsche’s italics left in) speaks first and most prominently, not about either art or science, but rather about “the task which this reckless book first dared to approach” and to which even now he is “no stranger.” This task is not about science or art as such; it is about life, specifically about the experience of living in a problematically scientific culture that, among other things, seems increasingly to have little concern for art. It is for the sake of this task and in the face of this experience, that BT proposes not only “*to look at science through the prism of the artist, but also to look at art through the prism of life*” (BT, 5). Note the two parts of the strategy—and their order. That BT does battle with science by means of art may ultimately have made it a “badly written, clumsy, [and] embarrassing” book, but what inspired its creation was not a wish to elevate art over science but to find a means to articulate the needs of a “life” that finds science problematic.

Hence, what Nietzsche actually says should be read in terms of this experience, not the other way around. Too many interpretations try to construct a theory of his “position” or “system” by means of a speculative synthesis of all his expressed strategies, periods of publication, stages of development, beliefs apparently held about philosophy, science, and art as traditionally defined—all for a philosopher who repeatedly explains why he does not and could not have a position or system (not even the non-system of perspectivism). Reconstructions of this external, top-down sort call for something like the thought experiment in which one is flying over a soccer game, low enough to see all the action but too high to see the ball. Just as with any theory through which one would try to explain what ties all the game’s behaviors together, theories of Nietzsche’s system or position do not see that all of his works are already unified “on the field”—in other words, not by a Mind linking strategies and perspectives together by means of an externally



imposed principle or predefined purpose but from within the ongoing and problematic experience of his “nethermost self,” as he calls it in EH—that is, from inside that socio-culturally embodied place where his continually renewed efforts to *really speak* receive their impetus.<sup>20</sup>

His “task [*Aufgabe*],” then, has no single, unchanging label or “essential” form of expression, but is instead the subject of an unending effort at creative articulation that makes all of his strategies, developmental changes, and temporarily embraced positions seem desirable or disposable.<sup>21</sup> This process of articulation is the only way to genuinely “become what you are.” It cannot be a matter of “catching sight of yourself *with* this task,” so that you might establish consciously and in advance the method or strategy or set of principles in terms of which all successive articulations would be worked out. Becoming what you are—creatively giving voice to a “burning” experience (“an organizing, governing ‘idea’ [that] keeps growing deep inside”)—means being “cautious even about great words, great attitudes,” because any belief that you have finally laid hold of the Royal Road to Expressing the What I Mean “pose[s] the threat that instinct will ‘understand itself’ too early” (EH, 96–97). Or to put the matter in terms of Nietzsche’s problem with science: Becoming what you are—that is, living a genuinely rich and vital life—is precisely not something we can do the way we conduct science, by agreeing in advance to suppress how we feel about reality, to adopt a universal set of research standards, and to strive to think like every other scientist. Kantian ethics is for Minds, not human beings.

Nietzsche’s retrospective self-assessment in EH is thus a clear example of the way he understands his experiential “task” in relation to what he says on its behalf in various works. I wrote HAH, he says, at a time when BT’s idealization of art as an antidote for straight science had come to seem in need of its own corrective. In still later retrospect, however, HAH’s “brutal” exposure of the empty perfectionism of traditional non- and pre-scientific ideals seems equally excessive. In other words, in EH’s retrospect, the initial costs of “being” a philologist were compounded in two stages, first through BT’s exaggerated flight from the deadening outlook of scholarly detachment into the empty and equally life-destroying embrace of unrealizable ideals, and then later in HAH, which tried to “put an abrupt end to all the ‘higher lies,’ ‘idealism,’ [and] ‘beautiful feelings’” of tradition in an equally abstract and empty way (EH, 119):

To creep through ancient metrists with diligence and bad eyes—that is what I had come to! I was worried how thin and starved I had become: my knowledge was completely devoid of *realities*, and [yet also] my “idealities” were not worth a damn! I was seized with an almost burning thirst: and in fact, from that point on, I pursued nothing more than physiology, medicine, and the natural sciences—I did not return, even to genuine historical studies, until [in the wake of BT *and* HAH] the *task* forced me to. (EH, 118)



Like all of Nietzsche's retrospectives, its underlying and unifying point will be obscured if one is content to listen to its critique of what BT and HAH explicitly say or of how they say it. For what guides the critique is "my instincts" as they inform the human being that the author of EH has become, so that in writing his critique of BT and HAH Nietzsche displays the power of these instincts to set up a task that survives and grows through all his creatively excessive articulations. The purpose of his autocritiques, then, is self-renewal; indeed, it is precisely because they have this purpose that he is able to treat earlier works primarily in terms of what is excessive about them, rather than, say, by trying to correct them or to restate their point. His aim is always to open up a better way forward (which one expects to find, of course, in the book the critique is introducing).

We can now understand why UM2 suffers with unusual severity from such retrospective treatment. A quick perusal of its explicit structure actually appears to justify its neglect. For aside from the passages in which the problematic nature of science is described, there seems to be nothing in the text that Nietzsche can later point to as constituting either a strong and "personalized" expression of "my instincts" or a sustained and creative (let alone "excessive") articulation of those instincts. There is scant mention of art or music, and no effort to juxtapose something else against the cultural monopoly of science. Indeed, after §3 the essay seems to offer little more than repeated broadsides against the life-destroying effect of the scientific attitude and 60 pages of complaints about the sickness of too much historical knowledge. In short, unlike BT and the other untimely meditations, UM2 recommends no antidote other than less history—no paean to art, no alternative pedagogy, no unscientific or extra-scientific perspective, not even an especially illuminating portrait of creative life. As he later says, UM2's author is still too sick to do more but recount his struggle as a recovering historian.

In an important respect, however, I think the fact that Nietzsche wrote UM2 as someone still recovering from an excess of historical knowledge (and a professional commitment to find ever more of it)—that is, as someone who is not a "free spirit," who is not yet "over" the things he writes about, and who has not found "his" voice—is a special (if unintentional) gift to his readers. For what we can see, even if he does not "make it known" to us, is that in this essay he addresses an issue that he otherwise tends to speak of only in retrospect and then for the most part only in the context of complaints about earlier hyper-expressive strategies. Especially in its early sections, UM2's central concern is really, as we might put it, *how do the instincts operate?* How "are" we, such that first this excess and then that are always open to correction—where excessiveness is not judged either in itself or according to an external standard but in its being an unsatisfactory articulation of "the task"? The short answer to this question is that we—in our instincts, in our concrete "being historical"—operate "temporally," but this kind of temporalizing is of a very different and "lived" sort, not at all



like the externalized, traditional now-time that measures the movement of things with respect to before and after. The long answer is in the following sections, where I argue that Nietzsche's implicit reliance on an understanding of the temporality of experience brings focus to UM2's account of the three histories, and this in turn allows him to carry forward the "problem of history" left to us in Dilthey's ambiguous legacy by converting it from an epistemological issue about the sciences into a philosophical question about "being historical" and so being open (but only among other expressions of life) to the practice of science.

## NIETZSCHE ON BEING-HISTORICAL

All readers of UM2 who hope to avoid anachronism must start by paying attention to its title. Nietzsche's topic is neither *Geschichte*, the human past, nor *Historie*, the study of the human past and the knowledge that results. It is *Historie* assessed in association with Life. Hence, we know from the start that UM2's famous triad of potentially "advantageous" histories—the monumental, antiquarian, and critical—is neither a speculative invention nor part of a revisionist epistemology of historical science, but reflects instead Nietzsche's critical reaction to the wider cultural and psychological effect "on life" of the current practice of philology in Germany.<sup>22</sup> There was, of course, little chance the essay would be much welcomed by his former colleagues—especially when they found themselves accused of being "spoiled idlers in the garden of knowledge" (UM2, 245/59)—and if any doubt remains that Nietzsche meant this, a quick survey of his notes for an unpublished fifth meditation, "We Philologists," should be sufficient to remove it. But to repeat the main point, his topic is not historical science or scientists as such, and if he often speaks unkindly of the latter, it is primarily for extra-scientific reasons, not because he opposes their pursuit of historical knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard to imagine now, but in Nietzsche's day, classical philology was widely regarded as the very highest model of "scientific" investigation, especially in relation to the study of humanity, and not only in the socio-historical sciences but even in biology. This is not the place to recount the rise and development of philology as a science, but it is useful to note that one element of its influence rested on the widespread acceptance of something like Vico's idea that philology is to the sciences of human nature and human activity what mathematics is to the sciences of physical nature.<sup>24</sup> Or to put this in a Vichian idiom: if mathematics is the language of the book of nature, as Galileo taught, then philology is the language of the book of humanity. Against the accepted background of this idea, then, how philology is practiced—and more importantly, how this practice is understood by the larger culture—already mattered "to [German] life" without any urging from Nietzsche. As the master science of humanity in a scientific



age, philology—especially through its studies of classical Greek culture in a nation that considered itself the supreme legatee of this culture—was positioned to provide the proper model for what it is to “know ourselves,” which in turn sets up the appropriate conditions under which to consider what we should do and how we should live.<sup>25</sup> And precisely here, says Nietzsche, is the “problematic” feature of philology—or given its paradigmatic status, the problematic feature of historical human sciences generally—namely, that both in philosophy and in the wider common culture, when it comes to the question of what we are to think of ourselves and how we ought to think of the good life, the default answer is “be like a scientist.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet everything that makes a good scientist—at least a good “positive” scientist at the end of the European nineteenth century (we must decide for ourselves to what extent this shoe still fits. . . .)—requires an attitude that is antithetical to living a vital, creatively individualized existence. The requirements—the need to focus on what has already happened and on what we can predict from it, the love of abstract, universal, and comprehensive theories that overwhelm the particularities of things,<sup>27</sup> the prideful “objectivity,” with its conviction that the best way to think is the way the “rules of method” require everyone to think—all of these characteristics may be necessary for scientific researchers but in the citizen, they define the very essence of an ordinary, predictable, uncreative drone who does what “one” does with no feel for untried and personally inspiring possibilities, no willingness to suffer for the sake of producing something extraordinary, and an excessive but undeserved self-regard for being the recipient of a “scientific education” and for belonging to the Right Tradition. In fact, for Nietzsche the scientific naturalism depicted by Comte in his descriptions of the third stage (and concretely represented for Nietzsche in Darwinian biologism) is the ultimate expression of the ascetic ideal of Western metaphysics.<sup>28</sup> Yet as we have seen, simply pushing for a reversal of the current preference for the scientifically cognizable over the creatively vital (often, “youthful” in UM2) is precisely what leads Nietzsche later to condemn works of this early period as excessively rebellious. Nietzsche’s “instincts” tell him that the quest for universal historical knowledge and the fashioning of a genuinely creative personal life cannot ultimately be conceived as exclusive options, any more than Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions of human being.

What makes UM2 unique, however, is that although Nietzsche thinks of it as “untimely” because it identifies a threat of sickness in the digestion of historical science where everyone else sees enlightenment, the essay does not start by throwing down this contentious gauntlet. Instead it starts with a description of what *underlies* his recognition of the tension between life and science, namely, his conception of our historical way of being. Nietzsche characterizes this condition as one that makes our existence an “always an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one” (UM2, 249/61). In an extended metaphor that has sometimes been hilariously misunderstood as a sign of Nietzsche’s “biological” outlook, he urges us to consider what



it is about our existence that might lead us to envy life in the herd, where animals seem to

know nothing of yesterday or today but merely leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so continue from morning to night and day after day, tightly tethered by their pleasures and displeasures, staked to the moment, and thus neither melancholy nor bored.<sup>29</sup>

What a life! An existence that is never boring or painful, where pleasures and displeasures are neither anticipated nor missed, and thus where a happiness of the moment occurs automatically and effortlessly.<sup>30</sup> In a word, animal existence is “unhistorical” existence. It has no temporal thickness. Each moment is pure. Or so it can seem to us. . . .

For human beings, however, this sort of easy and accidental happiness can never be, because the “present” in which we live is never a momentary “now.” From the outside, of course, we may observe others as if they were serially frozen at such momentary points, measure their presence and passage, and theorize about the course of their lives by stringing these objectively located now’s together via explanations about antecedents and consequents. To some extent (though to what extent is much contested) we can even regard our own lives this way as well—as when turning 40 must be old, intelligence is gauged by scores on timed tests, social status is measured by zip code, or when we join the “Quantified Self” movement.<sup>31</sup> Yet phenomenologically speaking, what our lives really are to us directly and experientially is not a string of measurable data-points—as if, when I say I am doing or thinking something “presently,” I mean in this separate unit of quantified time, the one set off from other past and future units that “make up” my span of life. Lived moments are already thick with a sense of the past and the future. Every present, says Nietzsche, comes to us already imbued with our “having been,” that is, with a social, cultural, embodied, linguistic—in a phrase, historically determinate—sense of who and how we understand ourselves to be. We always “are” someone and somewhere already—“da,” as Heidegger says—blessed (or perhaps more often cursed) with lingering memories. Indeed for us, and unlike Nietzsche’s beasts, remembering and forgetting are unavoidable, not because we have wills too weak to stop it but because we are already living out an inheritance that is there in our lives inevitably as something *to* forget or remember. Animals can certainly seem to us to be living entirely and effortlessly in the moment—that is, they seem “go into the present like a number without leaving any curious remainder,” Nietzsche says, “fenced in between past and future in blissful blindness.” But we are not animals. Every human being is “chained” to an inheritance, and

however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him. It is a wonder: a moment, now here, now gone, nothing before, nothing after, nonetheless



returns like a specter and disturbs the peace of a later moment. . . . Then he says, “I remember” and envies the animal, who immediately forgets and sees every moment really die, sink back into fog and night, and be extinguished forever. So does the animal live *unhistorically*. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Even if we humans were to try (and inevitably fail) to strip the present of all sense of the past, we would still be unable to live “unhistorically” like animals, or like babies before they understand the meaning of “it was” or of “once upon a time.”

It is in terms of this contrast between the lived temporality of concretely historical beings like us and the now-time of measurement—or more colorfully, the time characteristic of an “unhistorical” animal existence—that Nietzsche explains our “need” for historical knowledge. But let us be clear. This may be what his explanation *does*, but it is not what Nietzsche *discusses*. Heidegger is right here. In spite of Nietzsche’s own later self-criticisms, UM2 gives us much more than excessive broadsides against scientism that had to be “contradicted” in later works before he could return to “*genuine* historical studies” without dwelling on the shortcomings of historical research. In UM2, Nietzsche does indeed “understand more than he makes known to us” (SZ, 396) about the lived time of historical beings, and we can recognize this *in the way he explains* how historical knowledge can be “advantageous” to our lives. In *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger simply asserts this in passing, without spelling out precisely what it is that he thinks Nietzsche implicitly understands, saying only that this understanding concerns the “threefold unity” of monumental, antiquarian, and critical history whose “ground” is never discussed. As we will see in the next three sections, however, both this necessary unity and its ground can be elucidated in terms of Nietzsche’s discussion of our “need” for all three histories.

## NIETZSCHE ON OUR “NEED” OF HISTORIE

To repeat, the point of UM2’s conjured comparison of beasts and humans is this. Whatever the biological facts about animals, the central ontological fact about human beings is their historicity. For us to be is to live historically—to always arrive in the present, already “having been” (*Gewesen-sein*).<sup>33</sup> Here is Nietzsche’s contribution to the *Philosophy in History* debate a century before the fact. Our “need” for historical knowledge is not a matter of deciding whether and how to acquire information on a strange topic, as if we were presently unacquainted with the past and considering the advisability of studying it. If past *events* are over and done with, their *having been done* still shapes our inherited sense of what there is and what our relatedness to it means. Historical knowledge promises to illuminate what we already mean to ourselves. It is our entrée to the Delphic oracle’s admonition, “Know thyself” (UM2, 332–33/122). In this way, the connection



between *Historie* and life is more intimate than between the natural sciences and life, for historical knowledge can only alter our conscious attitude toward something we already possess, not add something previously foreign to a repertoire that begins without it. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of historical knowledge for life is thus a question of determining how it can quicken our inherited sense of who we already are:

Direct self-observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves: we require history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but what at every moment we experience of this continued flowing. (HA II §223, 267–68)

Nietzsche often draws on the famous motto from Pindar's Second Pythian Ode, "Become what you are," to make this point (though of course in contrast to the ancients, his reading of "what you are" is historical not essentialist). It is historically informed self-understanding that grounds and illuminates the real possibilities "I" have; for they constitute "my" nature and circumstance, and my flourishing depends on staying in touch with demands that grow out of my experience of this nature. If we had essences, in the traditional sense, then all we could do is get busy being ourselves, as Aristotle says. But our inherited constitutions are not like that, and this is why we must interpret our need for historical knowledge in terms of its advantage for the "health" of individuals, cultures, and peoples—that is, in relation to the possibility of their fashioning something unexpected and extraordinary out of their inherited "natures."

Yet if this flat exposition of Nietzsche's point is accurate, it is also too abstract and insensitive to actual conditions. Yes, we need historical knowledge to cultivate an explicit sense of who we already are, but Nietzsche faces this question *in a historically minded age*—which means that for him (and us?) it is an age everywhere endangered by a tendency to overestimate the virtues of simply being knowledgeable. For this reason, we will be better off thinking of historical knowledge as a poison (UM2, 264, 330/72, 120)—that is, a medicine that is health-giving in measured doses but fatal when swallowed in excessive amounts. So, when Nietzsche asks about the "degree" to which this knowledge may be advantageous, he is doing more than favoring a certain metaphor; he is displaying a critical attitude toward the socio-historical atmosphere in which he must ask the question. Getting the dosage right is no context-neutral laboratory task; it must be determined in a culture that encourages addictive behavior.

How, then, is it possible to determine the right dosage of history? The answer Nietzsche gives in the early sections of UM2 is somewhat awkward but suggestive. He says our need for historical knowledge can be found in the way we combine in action the historical and the "unhistorical" (*unhistorisch*) elements of our being. Of course, Nietzsche does not mean we avoid overdosing on history by giving some expression to the animal in us. True



enough, he asks us to picture animals as living “unhistorically” (also *unhistorisch*). Metaphors, however, do not behave like representations. We need not worry about determining The Meaning of this word.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, a closer look reveals that “the unhistorical *in man*” is always a hedged notion—that is, always modified with adjectives and limiting phrases that show how, in the end, one cannot really say there is something literally unhistorical in us. The point is to pin down how one can “be” historical, and therefore need to “know” about it, but still maintain a sense of existence that judges the necessity for the latter in terms of the former. As Nietzsche puts it, one cannot *enact* what Heraclitus *knows*. (UM2, 250/62). Historians aspire to “see becoming everywhere,” like divinely surveying Minds. Perhaps this encourages global optimism (e.g., Comte) or pessimism (e.g., Spengler) about the future; or perhaps it merely induces intellectual weariness (“the more things change, the more they remain the same”). But all of these “superhistorical” attitudes make one too “wise” to value a life of creative activity.<sup>35</sup> As anyone who has ever been seized by a powerful inspiration will tell you, “we will gladly acknowledge that the superhistorical outlook possesses more wisdom than we do, as long as we can be sure that we possess more life” (UM2, 256/66). To act, to accomplish anything, to push against what already is for the sake of what is still possible, one must have the strength and focus that comes only from a degree of unselfconsciousness about circumstances and prospects, so that one implicitly “draws a boundary” around the sense of what one is doing. The ideal state of the historical scientist is to do nothing and know everything in a fully conscious way, but for all human activity, some measure of “forgetfulness” is essential. Again, dramatically overdrawn, we can imagine living “almost without memory, indeed liv[ing] happily, as the animal shows us; but without forgetting, it is utterly impossible to live at all” (UM2, 250/62). In the midst of a great passion for carrying out something extraordinary, there is no room for keeping in mind how difficult extraordinary actions always are, what the odds are against success, or how my possible accomplishments may or may not fit in with the established scheme of things. In such a state, we “forget most things in order to do the one thing,” and from the point of view of a careful and nuanced scholarly account, this undoubtedly makes us treat the past unfairly. Yet “no painter will paint a picture, no general achieve victory, no people attain its freedom without having first longed for and striven after it in an unhistorical condition” (UM2, 253–5/64).

In the early sections of UM2, then, our “need” for historical knowledge is considered in terms of its proper combination with the “*unhistorical*” element in our nature. This does not mean, however, that the latter merely takes the measure of the former, as if the aim is to achieve some sort of abstract balance or equilibrium between them. We must remember that Nietzsche’s whole discussion of the *historisch* and the *unhistorisch* begins with a recognition that to be human is to “be historical.” *Being* historical is not the same as having two capacities, one for knowing the past, the other



for clearing a history-free space where we can decide what to do with the knowledge. Juxtaposing the historical and the unhistorical is Nietzsche's somewhat overdrawn and indirect way of describing a tension that arises *in* life, not a clash of two opposing forces *of* life.

Another way to put the point is this. From the outside, our current state of being-historical appears as the determinate result of all the conditions leading up to it, and if one asks from this external perspective what someone might make of such a state, all we can say is that there is not yet anything to observe, that future states are as yet unknown (though probably predictable), and . . . we'll just have to wait and see. However, from within one's own experience—viewed, if you will, phenomenologically—“arriving at the present as having-been” is not a state at all, and it is also *never quite the whole story*. To be sure, at any given moment, everything already makes sense in terms of having-been; one knows one's way around because of it. Yet to some extent it is always also burdensome (*lästig*), like a slightly ill-fitting suit of clothes (or worse), and it is thus a having-been that is incapable of being comfortably just re-enacted. At best, it is a small drag on pure spontaneity, at worst a barely tolerable impediment to any satisfying action whatever. Hence, the point of Nietzsche's metaphor: If we were just historical through and through, if we simply arrived in the present conditioned by what we have inherited and been through, then more of the same might well be enough—if indeed, the question of its being enough could even arise. But in fact, we are always at least a little unhistorical, too—a little disconcerted by, dissatisfied with, restless about, or resistant to the prospect of just playing things out. It is this double experience of *already being something but also not being quite properly prepared by it for the current experience of a desired future* that Nietzsche tries to capture by saying that “the historical and the unhistorical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people, or a culture” (UM2, 252/63). This is the condition that makes “*Become what you are*” an existential problem and an admonition, not just a principle to live by. There is a “natural relation between life and *Historie*,” he says, insofar as cultures and peoples as well as individuals can grow and flourish only by understanding the unsatisfactoriness of their inherited condition when judged against their present and future prospects (UM2, 271/77). Ask artists or musicians or aspiring leaders about their accomplishments, and odds are that instead of dwelling on their triumphs, trophies, and honors, they will redirect you instead to their current plans and new projects and be eager to tell you how much better these will be. Perhaps on this matter, the English language displays a bit of “wisdom,” in Nietzsche's sense. Someone who has become great but is now spent is called, with perhaps somewhat cruel honesty, a has-been.

What makes the difference here—that is, how the tension between the historical and the unhistorical is best worked out—depends upon the strength of the latter, of one's “formative power . . . to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign,



to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds” (UM2, 251/62). Those individuals, cultures, peoples, and ages with strong instincts—where the “innermost roots go deep”—can tolerate more knowledge of their inheritance, withstand and even be roused to action by the most tragic, barbaric, unjust events, and be made more ambitious and less tolerant of the imperfections in even the most satisfying present. For such powerful souls, the “bounded horizon” of the unhistorical by the historical can be vast. Where minor artists strive to be the best of kind, or perhaps to found a school, great artists strive to be the best. Again, in hyperbolic terms,

the most powerful and tremendous nature one could imagine would be distinguished by the fact there would be no boundary at all at which its historical sense began to stifle and do harm to it; it would draw into itself all of the past, its own and what is most foreign to it, and transform it, so to speak, into its own blood. What such a nature cannot subdue it knows how to forget. (UM2, 251/63)

Hence, in §§ 2–3, as he discusses in detail how each of the three sorts of history can be either an advantage or disadvantage “for life,” Nietzsche judges the consequences of having too much, too little, and just enough of each history in terms of whether the “proper boundary” is drawn around the instincts for creative activity.

Yet in these passages, Nietzsche also makes the same point in another, more illuminating way, but not in so many of his own words. What he says is that the three histories should be evaluated “only in the service of the future” (UM2, 271/77). What he does not say is that he is operating here with a non-traditional sense of futurity. To understand this, we must read between his lines. Consider, for example, his fleshed out version of Wordsworth’s one-liner, “We murder to dissect.” Note that what Nietzsche stresses not the murder itself but its epistemic and ontological effects. In his words, “a historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and reduced to a cognized phenomenon, is, *for the person who has known it, dead*” (UM2, 257/67, my emphasis). For the historian as historian, everything that empowers human actions and that might quicken our response to events has been drained from them so that they can appear as (hear the scientism) “objects of knowledge.” The person for whom they *are* objects must *be* someone who cannot be stirred by the “historical power” of these events. *Erkenntnisphänomene* and their *Erkennen* form an intentional but devitalized whole. One must *be* objective in the presence of objects. The horizon drawn around historical knowledge thus strangles the life out of its possessors—a fact that is, of course, precisely Nietzsche’s worry about the cultural trend toward identifying education with scientific education. Nietzsche’s “spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge” is both a dangerous possibility for every “educated” German and a caricature of the epistemically proper scientist, for whom the ideal present would be a present temporal



space in which everything essential about the past is clearly conceived and all expectations about the future have been turned into predictions we can already make. In this ideal present, what once *was* is theoretically comprehended *now*, such that what *will* happen is predictable. Here, in this *present*, everything receives its measure—just as the traditional conception of time requires.

Historical science, Nietzsche sometimes says, cultivates premature consciousness of the future; it strives to bring everything worth knowing before us Now and thus poisons the “natural” relation between our lives and the past we need to know about, by pursuing historical knowledge in such a way that the past is comprehended in a form we can no longer relate to for the sake of creative action. What Nietzsche thus implies but never quite says is that the natural relation between life and *Historie* must be understood in terms of a different sort of temporality, where the present is a time for a active transformation of what has come down to us from the past, not an epistemically predefined ideal moment in which one comes as close as possible to “settling accounts with life” and closing the books on any further concern about the shape of our future, other than perhaps a bit of curiosity about the accidental details of how what is already essentially here before us might still play itself out.<sup>36</sup> When knowing “dominates,” life grows sick:

The study of history is something salutary and fruitful for the future only as it follows in the wake of a powerful new current of life, of an evolving culture for example, that is to say only when it is dominated and directed by a higher force and does not itself dominate and direct. (UM2, 257/67)

It is this “higher force”—that is, the inner strength, plastic power, instinct for the task before me, or whatever Nietzsche calls this “unhistorical” vitality at the core of our being in various places—whose temporality is on display (if not on his lips) in his account of the advantages of three histories.

### THE THREE HISTORIES’ ADVANTAGES

To begin with the obvious, regarding the three histories generally, Nietzsche is clearly not talking about the kinds of *Historien* that historians would call specializations. History departments do not advertise for candidates to teach and publish in “monumental history”—though some historians undoubtedly pursue their work in its spirit.<sup>37</sup> To understand these histories and their advantages, one must see the three ways in which they “belong (*gehört*) to the living person” (UM2, 258/67). Some translations render *gehören* as “pertain” rather than “belong,” but it is worth being a bit picky here. “Pertain” is too easily heard as a scholarly term, one that refers to ideas or concepts or questions that are relevant when others are



being considered—that is, where the *gehörig*-relation is cognitive or logical or topical, and the relation is thus external and additive: Consider X, and Y also pertains, is relevant or germane. Leaving Hegel aside, one says only awkwardly that ideas or concepts “belong” together, as if tied by an inner bond. But according to UM2, such a belonging together is precisely how we should understand the relation between *Historie* and life. To the researcher, the relation between historical knowledge and actual human life might be interesting or diverting, but this is not a scientific matter. It is the knowledge itself, and one’s possession of it, that is the point of the research. But to the aspiring individual or flourishing culture, coming to have knowledge of the human past is a kind of self-revelation, a disclosure of what presently being lived through—namely, “one’s own” inheritance, whose explicit consideration is potentially revelatory about my actually experienced condition.

In short, the early sections of UM3 present us with an account of the relation between history and life that suffers much less than usual from Nietzsche’s typically stronger expressions of opposition to scientistic epistemology or cultural sickness. To appreciate this important difference of inflection in these sections, one must be especially careful with some of its key terms. It is precisely in its “belonging” to life, says Nietzsche, that historical knowledge can be *nützlich*—useful, advantageous, of service—to life. All of these terms are offered in the various English editions. The Stanford translation even asks us to contemplate the “utility” of history for life.<sup>38</sup> But cultural atmospherics matter, and even if Nietzsche did not have to confront pragmatism and utilitarianism as philosophical movements, he was no stranger to (and certainly no friend of) scientism’s implied instrumentalism.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it would be a serious mistake to interpret his notion of “using” history for life as a matter of applying reliable knowledge to practice. Indeed, in a world that overvalues the paired practices of science and technology, it is probably not a good idea to translate “*Nutzen*” as “use” or utilization at all, unless the context makes the meaning very clear. For Nietzsche simply does not think of *Historie*’s advantages in instrumentalist terms, as if it were a toolkit full of “knowledge stones” (UM2, 272/78) that one first acquires through proper education, “applies” to “problematic situations,” and finally judges externally by gauging the “results.” The unfortunate thing about toolkits is that they encourage us to conduct our lives by seeing the situation in terms of what the tools can fix.

In reading his exposition of the three histories in §§2–3, then, we should keep two things in mind. Taking “advantage” of historical knowledge does not mean making “use” of it, in the usual sense, and the fact that Nietzsche succeeds to some extent in characterizing advantages in a non-polemical way illuminates something of what he understands about being-historical that he typically does not say. Nevertheless, the way forward here is not entirely unproblematic. Although Nietzsche begins by promising that he will be only secondarily concerned with “the proposition *to be demonstrated later*, that



[*Historie's*] excess is detrimental to life" (UM2, 258/67, my emphasis), in fact, he is never more than a line or two away from complaining that in a "historical culture," the pedagogically sanctioned urge to simply know more and more is forever threatening to turn each kind of history into the source of an intellectual disease rather than a contributor to existential health. Thus, for example, to the merely knowledgeable surveyor of great lives, *monumental history* becomes a mythology of heroes in which the implication is that everything of worth has already been accomplished. *Antiquarian history*, pursued for its own sake, eventually "no longer preserves life, but mummifies it" (UM2 268/75), so that in the merely "educated" student of the past, conservative and reverent feelings are transformed into something more like a perverse and reactionary love of the old. And when *critical history* becomes merely rigorous conceptual analysis, its condemnations of past deeds and events, "objectively" detached from any motivation to creatively confront one's own legacy in action, becomes so corrosive that significant change now seems to be either arbitrary or impossible.

As other commentators have noted, UM2's early and more positive tone changes dramatically in the rest of the essay—that is, after Nietzsche discusses history's advantages in §§2–3 and has identified what he takes to be the "powerful, hostile star" of scientism that is settling over the constellation of life and history in his era (§4). By the time he has catalogued all five of the progressively more degenerative effects on the human spirit that together constitute the "supersaturation" of his age with historical knowledge (§§5–10), we are looking at the full destructiveness of a terminal illness. Thus, an essay that begins, in the name of creative life, with a juxtaposition of the historian's objective outlook and the "living person's" need for historical knowledge, seems to end with a virtually unrelieved indictment of the common cultural consciousness of the age. Nietzsche's opening consideration of a health-giving dose of what is otherwise a poison, turns increasingly into a condemnation of a poisoned culture, where everyone tends to suffer from the deadening effects of historical knowledge, and "youthfulness" is no longer history's guide but its arch enemy, the antidote for a poison.<sup>40</sup> "Untimeliness" thus does not signify the same thing throughout UM2, and this, too, should be kept in mind especially as one reads §§2–3. At the beginning, Nietzsche portrays it more as a provocation, of telling people what they don't want to hear—or, if you want, of being what creative people always are in the eyes of more pedestrian souls and normal minds. But by the end of the essay, untimeliness is portrayed as something oppositional, more purely polemical—or, if you want, more willful. From UM2's closing sections, it can indeed appear to be just a short step to Nietzsche's later doctrines of the Will to Power and Eternal Return—for example, to Zarathustra's view that when history is made into a science, it can *only* persuade us to accept " 'that which was' as a stone we cannot roll aside" and to draw from this observation the enfeebling life-lesson that



no deed can be annihilated; how could it be undone through punishment? This, this is what is eternal about the punishment called existence, that existence must also eternally be deed and guilt again!<sup>41</sup>

Against the “madness” of this preaching, there can *only* be our enactment of that countervailing power that refuses—indeed is unable—to only look back, namely,

. . . . the will [as] a creator . . . [for which] all “it was” is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, “But thus I willed it.” Until the creative will says to it, “But thus I will it, thus I shall will it.” (ibid., trans. altered)

Here is the mature Nietzsche, if indeed this is what we must conclude about him, seeking “redemption,” if not comfort, in the joyful affirmation of the eternally recurring possibility of simultaneous creation and destruction. Time cannot be finally conquered, he says, but it can be continually mastered.

Perhaps this radically “unhistorical” attitude, so prominently displayed in the later sections of UM2, does truly make the essay a spiritual ancestor of Nietzsche’s later works—where even youthfulness comes to be more suspected of naïveté than praised as an unspoiled source of creativity, where one must be a straightforward opponent of historical objectivity, and only in this opposition, finally manage to give proper credit to the supremacy of the Will. Of course, there are signs of this purely oppositional spirit scattered throughout UM2. For example, at one point Nietzsche even seems to withdraw his appeal to all three histories by suggesting that one who is really capable of greatness has little use for the latter two. “*Above all*,” he says, “history belongs to the man of deeds and power, to him who fights a great fight, who needs models, teachers, comforters and cannot find them among his contemporaries.”<sup>42</sup> Thus,

if the man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; he, on the other hand, who likes to *persist* in the familiar and the revered of old, tends the past as an antiquarian historian; and *only* he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, aside from those fully capable of heroic deeds—here, those who appear capable of virtually surpassing the burden of being historical—there are those who are better off favoring one of the other two histories, according to their natures. For “much mischief is caused through the thoughtless transplantation of these plants: the critic without need, the antiquary without piety, the man who recognizes greatness but cannot himself



do great things. . . .” Such is the portrait of the inspired but increasingly anti-historical spirit that dominates the long polemical sections of UM2.<sup>44</sup>

We may certainly understand how diagnosing a historical malignancy could prompt Nietzsche to exaggerate the freshness and independence of creative life by sometimes elevating it into a mode of existence in which the disease is absent. Yet the fact remains that *anti-historical opposition* to history is not the same as *unhistorical use* of history, and Nietzsche’s polemical descriptions of German culture (and his experience of its dangers) are ultimately at odds with his more appreciative descriptions of the one who “needs” history given at the beginning of UM2. Perhaps we should give special weight, then, to the fact that he displays this more appreciative tone again at the very end of the essay, where he praises the spirit of youthfulness in historically scientific times. It is not genius but youth, he says, that “compels me to protest at historical education of modern man, and . . . I demand instead that he should above all learn to live, and to employ history *only in the life that he has learned to live*.”<sup>45</sup> Note that for those who have “learned how to live,” protest is not the fundamental relation one wants to cultivate with history. For such a person, it is in relation to “my” life, the specific one I am learning to live, that history really matters. That there is a difference between an anti-historical and an unhistorical stance toward historical knowledge is thus no logical or conceptual point; it is a matter of what sort of life is projected by each stance. To “be” historical and to take advantage of one’s heritage through knowing it, cannot be effected by the application of external socio-political or epistemic standards that tell us what to oppose and what to embrace. The test comes “from within” the life I am learning to live—from “how” I am living, not from what I know.

This is the point I want to emphasize. The idea of a creative, even rebellious, but not oppositional response to the experience of being historical—and of having a feel for what it would take to be more than a further instantiation of what one already is through inheritance—is deeply embedded in Nietzsche’s writings, even if it is often overshadowed by the more famous and sensational bursts of metaphorical hyperbole that so often accompany his critique of the deadening effect of contemporary culture and philosophical tradition. Clearly, this means there is something other than the protesting Will that *forms the basis* of one’s relation with history, something that is not anti-historical. Nietzsche variously designates this something as “my instincts,” or my feel for “the task,” or his reflective encounter with his own polemical excesses. In UM2, this underlying something is typically described as the experience of the “burden” of inheritance, the lived sense of a lack of fit between what I have already become, on the one hand, and my strong and demanding sense of how I might yet be, on the other.

As Nietzsche sees it, those who understand Pindar’s “become what you are” are able to recognize how their education falsely encourages them to



ignore their instincts, to endure what their teachers want them to see as the “contradiction between knowledge and life,” and to settle for the idea that as inheritors of great culture, being cultured can only mean having knowledge of it. Yet apart from all these dangers, they will also recognize “what characterizes culture for genuinely cultured peoples: that it can only grow and flourish *out of life* . . . [not be] pinned on like an artificial flower or spread on like icing” (325–26/117). How culture, or the individually creative existence, grows “out of life” is the central topic of the early sections of UM2. Too often, especially in the later sections, the polemical language in Nietzsche’s essay encourages us to consider only what someone who is *knowledgeable* about the past should be *against*. But to take *advantage* of such knowledge in one’s *actions* is something very different, and it is to this more intimate relevance of the three histories “for life” that I now turn.

### THE THREE HISTORIES: THEIR TEMPORAL SIGNIFICANCE

In its general outline, Nietzsche’s account of the way that the three kinds of history might be advantageous to life is well-known. Monumental history identifies exemplary individuals who may inspire us to see truly great possibilities and encourage us in our struggles by showing how extraordinary things can indeed be accomplished. Antiquarian history’s comprehensive reconstructions encourage conservative and reverent sentiment toward our origins—indeed make us aware that we have “roots”—and so awaken a respect for what is worthy of preservation and an appreciation for the way our inheritance makes possible genuine growth, not merely arbitrary and fortuitous change. And critical history encourages in us the urge to assess and finally condemn the very same inherited past by reminding us that we “suffer and desire deliverance” from the injustices that are also part of our inheritance. Most commentators focus on these histories one at a time, treating each of them as reflecting an attitude toward the past, and selecting mostly those passages in which Nietzsche describes the disadvantage of each attitude when it influences present life excessively. As I have suggested, however, Nietzsche’s descriptions of the advantages of history in the early part of UM2 are far more interesting and original. For §§2–3 tend to focus on how to take advantage of all three histories together, rather than either warning us about overdoses or simply favoring monumental history as all a really powerful individual needs.<sup>46</sup>

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, I think Heidegger is right to say that we can detect here Nietzsche’s silent reliance on an understanding of a special sense of *temporality* that grounds and unifies his conception of how creative people take joint advantage of the three histories. Several features of his account give strong evidence for this. First, he explains the unique *significance* of each type of history in a way that seems to correlate



that history with one particular aspect of time. Second, he treats the three histories in an *order* the simultaneously arranges the three phases of time in the same way—namely, future first, then past, and finally present. And third, he depicts taking advantage of the three histories as forming a single, *unified activity*—a process in which the three temporal phases are lived through together in the order just mentioned. I will discuss the first feature in this section; the other two, in the next.

Regarding the *temporal significance* of each of the three histories, Nietzsche begins by identifying the way each belongs to us as living individuals—namely, insofar as we are beings who “act and strive” [for the sake of our future], who “preserve and venerate” [our inherited past], and who “suffer and are in need of liberation” [now, at the present moment] (UM2, 258/67). As indicated in my brackets, the correlation with phases of time is implicit but obvious, and in each case, both the advantages and the disadvantages of a type of history (the latter analyzed here primarily in terms of excess, or overdose, rather than deficiency) are presented in accordance with the same particular temporal sense. Thus, when monumental history inspires, it does so above all with respect to one’s sense of *future*. What is most admirable about the inspired young is their hunger to do something significant, their refusal to merely watch and wait for things to occur “as usual.” Only someone captivated by a sense of his or her own untried possibilities is immune from the temptation to turn great examples into objects of myth and worship (or conversely, exposed fallen angels one knows too much about). Indeed, it is this sense of openness to their own possibility of greatness that seems to keep the inspired person’s awareness of both the inherited past and conventional present in check. If the sense of one’s future is dominated by a gaze at what has already been done, one’s vital instincts can be overpowered by the traditional and venerable. If one’s own future is seen primarily in terms of current preoccupations (i.e., is oppressed with “instant needs,” or cursed with a traditionalist sense of “what one does”), one loses the power to make appropriate discriminations among them. The point is, when inspired youth listens to Nietzsche’s exhortation, “Become what you are,” they hear the “become” first.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, as monumental history itself shows us, although great persons are not tradition-bound they are also not merely rash and egotistical rebels. In this, they seem to marry their urge to creativity with an antiquarian’s appreciation for the *past*—indeed, *their* past—for they also hear the rest of Pindar’s slogan and recognize that it is a matter of becoming what you already “are” (i.e., having arrived in the present as already being). Perhaps, Nietzsche says in a more pessimistic passage, antiquarian history is more often advantageous for simply keeping a lot of fairly uninspired individuals (and “less-favored generations and peoples”) from “the dreadful consequences of the [mere] desire for expeditions and adventures.” Yet in at least some people, antiquarian history can produce “the happiness of knowing that one is not wholly accidental and arbitrary but has grown out of a past as its heir,



flower and fruit . . . ” (UM2, 266–67/73–74). It is from this recognition of having “grown out of a past” that one can develop a “genuine (*eigentlich*) sense of history”—that is, one that is “animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present” (UM2, 268/75). In a famous loose metaphor, Nietzsche puts it this way. A tree “feels its roots more than it can see them,” but all the same, it can only gauge the worth and extent of these roots from familiarizing itself with its own branches and with the way established surroundings “favor or obstruct” it. And here there is a problem. Especially in a scientific culture, there is always the danger that one’s historical sense might detach itself from the life it serves in an attempt to “resolve the past into [an object] of pure knowledge”—with the ultimate effect that

everything old and past that enters one’s field of vision at all is simply accepted as equally venerable, while everything that does not approach the ancient with reverence, thus everything that is new and in the process of becoming, is met with hostility and rejected. (UM2, 267/74)

In other words, genuine inspiration cannot occur all by itself; it thrives in an atmosphere of understanding and reverence for one’s roots. Yet excessive reverence prompts us to see the past as already containing whatever is great and admirable, so that we “only understand how to preserve [past] life, not to create it.” Indeed, without being rooted in the inspired life it can potentially benefit, the antiquarian spirit ultimately no longer even seeks to preserve life but rather to “mummify” it. And to complete the metaphor, “the tree then withers and dies in an unnatural way, from the top gradually downwards toward the roots—and in the end the roots themselves usually perish” (UM2, 268/75).

It is important, moreover, to note that Nietzsche regards the possibility that antiquarian history might overwhelm life’s fresh impulses as a danger in its own right, not just as a threat if it loses connection with its vital “foundation.” For unlike monumental history, antiquarian research by its very nature “always undervalues what is in the process of becoming because it has no instinct for divination.” Left to itself, the antiquarian spirit not only shies away from evaluating more recent events on the grounds that we don’t yet know how things will turn out, but moves instead from sheer preference for the old toward the idea that it is therefore be regarded as immortal—with the result that it then “comes to seem arrogant or even impious to replace an ancient thing with something novel” (UM2, 268–69/75). (One can hear in this Nietzsche’s contempt for the ideals of nineteenth century German culture: “Really? Better than the Great Masters?”) Thus in the end, Nietzsche’s discussion of the first two kinds of history leaves us with the picture of a likely (and life-harming) intellectualism—one that is especially to be expected in the current atmosphere, where “historical sense” is typically associated with a cognitive attitude rather than a creative existence. In such an atmosphere, the mind slips all too easily into a “habit of



scholarliness . . . that rotates in egoistic self-satisfaction around its own axis.” For an inspiration to survive in such a powerfully charged atmosphere, says Nietzsche, it needs something more. It must receive stimulus not only from tales of greatness and a consciousness of its own roots but also from a sense that, right now, creative action is not just possible but necessary. This latter stimulus comes from critical history.

Hence finally, the inspired and reverently rooted spirit must acquire, this time from critical history, “the strength to break up and dissolve a past in order to live. . . . to drag it before the tribunal, painstakingly examining and finally condemning it,” because from the viewpoint of the present, “every past is worthy of condemnation” (UM2, 269/75–76). In this third way, the one who takes advantage of history is alive to the special effect that criticism can have on one’s sense of the *present*. Critical history can encourage us to transform our sense of the present so that it appears as a decisive moment (*Augenblick*) in which we actually take up the inherited past for the sake of a future that does not leave present dissatisfactions intact.<sup>48</sup> To take advantage of the way that critical history properly belongs to us, is to be stimulated into taking a course of action that understands “becoming” as the possibility of overcoming the ways in which we “suffer and seek deliverance” from who we already are.

### THE THREE HISTORIES: THEIR TEMPORAL ORDER AND UNITY

In Nietzsche’s account, those who are able to take advantage of history are portrayed as understanding more than just the links between the three histories and the three aspects of time. They also actually take up monumental, antiquarian, and critical histories in a specific *order*—an order in which becoming inspired about our future is first privileged, and being respectful about our past and critical of our present then function “in service” of this inspiration. Indeed, in UM2’s early sections, Nietzsche appears to make this sense of lived temporal order a fundamental characteristic of historical being itself. It is not that a rare creative few are ontologically different from the rest of us. It is only that they have discovered a way to act out of a clear sense of how living-through this temporal order opens up ever-new existential possibilities. For the most part, we allow this temporal order to be obscured either by embracing metaphysically worshipful (or scientifically deterministic) conceptions of the past that depict our future as an “essentially” (or “naturally”) foregone conclusion, or by accepting hypercritical accounts of our inheritance that are so negative that they overwhelm us and leave us split off from the vital instincts that could guide creative responses to that inheritance no matter how problematic. In all such cases, our knowledge of the past is fashioned in such a way that it overpowers our capacity to privilege the future, much as advancing age tends to simply define the outlook



of most human beings.<sup>49</sup> This explains UM2's praise of "youthfulness," for youthful spirits—that is, those unwilling to settle for more of what was or now is, who are confident of their own creative possibilities, and who typically underestimate the power of the past to shape or even block these possibilities—find a way to creatively shape a future for themselves anyway, not in the sense that they would otherwise have none, but in the sense that they would otherwise have one that is commonplace.

Put otherwise, the very fact that we will have an ordinary future by default if we do not recognize it, gives the discussion of monumental history a kind of "therapeutic" priority, insofar as it can help us see how the cultivation of inspiration enables us to be, ontologically speaking, most like human beings. For it is when this history is used by those who are inspired about their future that its power to teach, guide, and comfort is released. Otherwise, interesting stories about great men (mostly) and general observations about past triumphs fall on indiscriminating ears and contribute nothing to the prevention of further repetitions of the familiar and idolized. Thus when Nietzsche puts monumental history first, devotes a separate section to it (but not to the two other types), and says its use is necessary "above all," this is not only because he is impressed by greatness or pessimistic about its appearance in his time. It is because he understands that unless one has already become inspired, the question of how to take advantage of one's inheritance and in what direction to carry it forward will remain obscure—or more likely, will be arbitrarily gauged by external and culturally approved standards or principles.

Nevertheless, once inspired youthfulness is aroused, its healthy growth cannot happen in a vacuum. A sheer eagerness for the extraordinary would leave one poised, merely ready to be put in touch with the past for the first time. What we want to understand is how what we have already become might yet move and transform us. For the uninspired, inheritance is fate. But if antiquarian history cannot help the uninspired shed this fate, it can help those who are inspired to distinguish a genuine from a terrible or merely abstract inspiration by showing how they stand in a heritage they can appreciate without having to assume that all their possibilities have been exhausted. For the one who would live creatively, antiquarian history is therefore properly discussed in the second place. One must already be inspired in order to be properly appreciative of one's roots; for the recognition of one's own future as *open* guides any genuine reverence for the past as one's *grounding*. Inspiration without reverence threatens to be empty, because it might have us imagine we can simply constitute new selves ("second natures," Nietzsche calls them), but reverence without inspiration threatens to be blind, because it would encourage the delusion that growth is either purely spontaneous or impossible.

Yet even when inspiration is tempered by reverence, the great thing still remains to be done—and it might not be done, especially in an age that overvalues the sheer possession of historical knowledge (and with it, a



super-awareness of past glories that overshadow one's own possibilities). Thus, in the third place, tempered inspiration must be motivated, which critical history can do by challenging us to confront what is intolerable about the experienced present. Inspiration, even grounded inspiration, faces both internal and external threats. Internally, it faces our own fears and weaknesses (recall what Nietzsche says about the "fragility" of second natures).<sup>50</sup> Externally, it faces a social milieu that encourages our identification of being knowledgeable with being cultured.<sup>51</sup> Without a strong and explicit recognition that our present situation requires actual transformation, says Nietzsche, we are likely to sink back into the educated satisfaction of having a legacy of greatness—a condition regarding the future in which we stop at the knowledge of possible goods and don't do them, because we also know of something still better that we cannot do or that has already been done (UM2, 270/76). Critical history, however, can show us precisely how our heritage leaves us struggling with unmet desires and unfulfilled aspirations, to say nothing of inherited injustice. After all, since we are

the results of earlier generations, we are also the results of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes. . . . [and if] we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. (UM2, 270/76)

It is self-deception to imagine that some abstract intellectual recognition or willful act of condemnation could actually make us free of our past—a truth about life that is never more obvious than in the moments when someone tries to convince us they are liberated.

Finally, then, when we ask how the three histories can be an advantage for life, the answer lies not just in understanding the contribution of each one seriatim, but in recognizing how these contributions converge in an actual, creative practice.<sup>52</sup> Whatever constitutes our "first natures," no matter how worthy, must in the end be subjected to our own harsh judgments, anchored as these are in a present experience of life that no inheritance can continue to satisfactorily represent. Some of us discover, for example, that the "democracies" into which we are undeservedly born are a living legacy of racism, sexism, and obscene political and economic inequalities that is inseparable from its collection of remarkable constitutions and parliaments. Or, to take a different sort of case, ask artists and musicians if they think their heritage is so glorious that they are eager to lay down their brushes and instruments. On the contrary,

the best we can do is bring our inherited and hereditary nature into conflict with our [historical] knowledge and even more, do battle against what is inbred and inborn *with a strict new discipline* and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. (UM2 269/76, my emphasis)



We might say that Nietzsche depicts the function of critical history as one that turns the living present into a sort of heightened “presence”—where one feels the need to employ one’s powers to move against and away from what one already has become. For most of us most of the time, historical being-present simply continues to be an unfolding of our having-been, and criticism tends to degenerate into angry defensiveness about the necessary and the sanctioned, or cranky protests against the present, or dystopian nightmares about our loss of a pure state or unencumbered life that we have never had. Yet to those who are already inspired about their future and then, too, reverent about their past—that is, who are already eagerly disposed to become what they are—critical history offers a way of uncovering precisely how their inherited condition now deserves condemnation. “It requires a great deal of strength,” says Nietzsche, merely “to be able to live and to forget the extent to which to live and to be unjust are the same thing.” But someone who takes advantage of critical history not only recognizes “how unjust the existence of a certain thing—a privilege, a caste, a dynasty, for example—is, and how much this thing deserves destruction. It is then one’s past is regarded critically, then one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety” (UM2, 269–70/76).

Of course, Nietzsche admits that this is dangerous business, and that much destruction is mere destruction. But it is also possible for such historical criticism to open up one’s present for “decisive moments,” when extraordinary things are accomplished. Many commentators, for understandable reasons, pounce on passages like these to demonstrate Nietzsche’s moral irresponsibility. How can he justify simultaneously glorifying decisive moments and undercutting—with his “perspectivism” and voluntarism and elitist theories of art and superior beings—all efforts to provide “objective” standards, at the very least for the purpose of separating creative from purely destructive moments?<sup>53</sup> No doubt, in the hands of a monster Nietzsche’s hyperbolic metaphors and displays of contempt for the pedestrian might easily be construed as license for evil. No doubt also, one can use Nietzsche as a foil to keep familiar philosophical questions or traditions in play, or one can try to rescue him from his own excesses by providing him with the “position” he should have taken on such matters. Yet unless one is already committed to domesticating Nietzsche into *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, it is worth pausing to ask, since he is obviously not keen on giving aid and comfort to moral monsters and never wanted to contribute to something like moral epistemology, what is it that Nietzsche “understands” that could prompt him nevertheless to risk so untraditional a path?

I allude here, of course, to Heidegger’s remark in SZ, where he says with specific reference to the “beginning” of UM2, that Nietzsche “understands” something that is potentially more important philosophically than anything he has “made known” to us (SZ, 396). I will argue in Chapter 8 that when Nietzsche insists that the ultimate verdict on historical knowledge must be



given by “life,” he displays an understanding of time and lived temporal unity that reinforces Heidegger’s interpretation of Dilthey’s “standpoint of life” as essentially a proto-phenomenological version of the “hermeneutic situation” within which SZ works out the Daseinsanalysis. More specifically, however, my point will be that in taking stock of this display of vital understanding, we must give as much attention to the fact that Nietzsche displays this understanding *without discussing it* as to the special sense of temporality he actually displays. *That* he understands something and *does not express it*—these two facts taken together tell us a good deal about how history matters to philosophy.

## NOTES

1. According to his conception of philology—viz., as being, “in a very broad sense, the art of reading well—of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand” (*The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Essays*, ed. Aaron Ridley et al. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], *Antichrist*, §52, 51)—we should conclude at the very least that “any interpretation that takes systematic unity as the measure of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and thus accuses him of ambivalence for not adhering to it, is openly anti-philological, in Nietzsche’s sense” (Werner Stegmaier, “After Montinari: On Nietzsche Philology,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38, no. 1 [2009]: 9, 11). Nietzsche himself, at least once, is blunter: “The will to system is a lack of honesty” (*Twilight*, “Arrows and Epigrams,” no. 26, 156). In general, I share the sentiments of James Winchester, “Of Scholarly Readings of Nietzsche: Clark and Magnus on Nietzsche’s Eternal Return,” *New Nietzsche Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (1999): 77–97. Winchester’s general complaint is that all efforts at synthesizing Nietzsche’s many voices into a consistent whole will inevitably be selective and reductive, sometimes with trivializing effect. In this chapter, I add another reason, viz., that systematic interpretations, precisely because of their theoretical commitment, always look for ways to tie disparate elements together on the same conceptual level, whereas I will be looking for ways in which Nietzsche’s starting point in the experience of historical life is all the “unity” one will ever find in him.
2. Heidegger, SZ, 396–97. For UM2 (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Lebens*), English page references will be listed second, after those of *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe im 15 Bänden*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter deGruyter, 1980). For the English, I have consulted most of the recent translations but will cite only Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (2nd meditation, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, trans. R. T. Hollingdale [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 57–123), hereafter UM2. For consistency, I will generally follow Hollingdale, with some (mostly minor) changes, occasionally acknowledging my alternatives when they seem philosophically important—starting, unfortunately with the UM2’s title (see n. 38). All other citations to Nietzsche’s works will be in English.
3. GS 7:192–93/SW 3:214–15. “Determined” here is *bestimmen*, so that one must not hear Dilthey saying that “the content of our lives” is the effect, and time, its cause. Readers may well wonder whether they can hear the



forerunner of Heidegger's notion of "formal indication" in Dilthey's idea of life-categorization. I do.

4. Readers of Nietzsche will know that it is awkward to call his work "philosophical." For a thorough study of the works and professional concerns of Nietzsche's early career based on extensive use of his unpublished notes from this period, see James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). For discussion of these early concerns and writings specifically in relation to UM2, see Anthony K. Jensen, "Geschichte or Historie? Nietzsche's Second *Untimely Meditation* in the Context of Nineteenth-Century Philological Studies," in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. Manuel Dries (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 213–29. As is well known, Heidegger's generosity toward UM2 does not survive the 1920s. In his winter semester 1938–39 lecture course, *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemässer Betrachtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2003), GA 46, he focuses not on Nietzsche's ontologically promising "unsaid" dimension, but on alleged his failure to move beyond his use of the metaphor of life to improve German culture (GA 46:212–13).
5. The best single survey of the secondary literature on UM2 is still Jörg Salaquarda, "Studien zur Zweiten *Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtung*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 13, no. 1 (1984): 1–45. The notes for the *Wir Philologen* appear in English as "We Classicists," trans. William Arrowsmith, in Nietzsche, *Unmodern Observations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 321–87. Arrowsmith's introduction explains nicely what Nietzsche, pace Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (see n. 23), really meant when he promoted a "philology for the future" in the *Birth of Tragedy* (307–20). There is an earlier version, "We Philologists," by the same translator, in *Arion* (New Series) 1, no. 2 (1973–74): 279–380.
6. The self-criticism actually begins in the last section of UM2 itself, where Nietzsche confesses that "in the immoderation of its criticism, in the immaturity of its humanity, in its frequent transitions from irony to cynicism, from pride to skepticism, the present treatise itself reveals its modern character, a character marked by weakness of personality" (UM2, 324/116). That Nietzsche sees this and then even goes on to describe quite differently what he "hopes" for is a point I return to at the end of this chapter.
7. Thomas H. Brobjer, "Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 301–22 (303). In *Ecce Homo* (EH) under the heading "The Untimely Ones," Nietzsche discusses the four "belligerent" *Meditations* much more in terms of what they accomplished than in terms of what is unsatisfactory about them, but the discussion is entirely about the other three *Meditations* except for one brief passage: "The second *Untimely* one (1874) sheds light on the danger inherent in the way we conduct our scholarship, which gnaws away at life and poisons it: life is sick from this dehumanized cog-grinding and mechanism, from the 'impersonal' nature of the worker, from the false economy of the 'division of labor.' The goal, culture, disappears—the means, modern scholarly practice, barbarizes. . . . In this essay, the 'historical sense' that this century is so proud of is recognized for the first time as a disease, as a typical sign of decay" (EH, 112). According to Brobjer, Nietzsche's subsequent "break" with Schopenhauer, Kant, and Wagner shortly after he finished UM2 made the work appear to him in retrospect as part of his juvenilia (Brobjer, 2004, 303–4), but this does not explain the subsequent neglect of UM2 specifically. More to the point, as his discussion shows, Nietzsche's later criticisms are primarily directed at UM2's specific views of and claims about metaphysics, art, philosophy, science, etc.,



and not (as I am about to emphasize) at its underlying self-conceived “untimeliness” in being both of his time and against it.

8. *Human, All Too Human* (HAH), trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209. “My writings,” he goes on to say, “speak *only* of my overcomings: I am in them, together with everything that was inimical to me, *ego ipsissimus*, indeed, if a yet prouder expression be permitted, *ego ipsissimum*” (209). Yet this is always strictly speaking false, as Nietzsche knows and as I discuss below, precisely because we are historical.
9. *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16. The partial exception, of course, is the centerpiece of this period, *The Birth of Tragedy*, about which his later remarks are more ambiguous and measured. Brobjer (2004, 306–7) cites an earlier version from a September 1879 letter to Paul Rée:

*On my first five little books.*  
Once, I thought, the A and O  
of my wisdom, was contained in them;  
Now, I no longer think so:  
only the eternal ah! and oh!  
of my youth do I find in them.

10. Think, e.g., of Heidegger, who originally planned his *Gesamtausgabe* to exclude the early lecture courses, which would have deprived us of a chance to witness among other things his “phenomenological breakthrough” of 1919 and his struggles in the early 1920s to work out a “formally indicative” language that would make possible everything from *Being and Time*’s “existentials” to his later efforts at non-representational “thinking.”
11. As will become clear shortly, I am not asking that we try to reconstruct the “intention of the author”—that chimera which unsympathetic critics of hermeneutical philosophy sometimes claim they are saving from its threat in the name of objectivity and genuine knowledge (see, e.g., Jeff Mitscherling, Tanya DiTommaso, and Aref Nayed, *The Author’s Intention* [Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004], ch. 3). Distinguishing between what Nietzsche says and what he must understand in order to say it does not leave us facing a collection of claims and strategies on the one hand and a mind-reading problem on the other. As the hermeneutic tradition since Dilthey has emphasized, even the most respectful “imaginative reconstruction” of an author’s lived motivations must recognize that no one—neither author nor reader—is ever fully conscious in advance of “what they mean” or of how its articulation will alter not only their landscape but that of all potential readers. That is the point, for example, of Heidegger’s “destructive retrieval” of Dilthey’s “intended” efforts to distinguish two sets of sciences, which I have already mentioned and will treat further in the next chapter. On Heidegger’s destructive retrieval of Dilthey specifically, see my “Becoming a Philosopher: What Heidegger Learned from Dilthey, 1919–25,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2013), 122–42.
12. “An Effort at Self-Criticism,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Essays* (BT), ed. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5–6.
13. For a recent collection that emphasizes both Nietzsche’s complex and thoroughly ambiguous attitude toward science, as well as the fact that from the very beginning he treated it as a cultural phenomenon and not just as a set of



disciplines, see Gregory Moore and Thomas H. Brobjer, eds., *Nietzsche and Science* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

14. In what follows, I stress the shallowness of interpretations of Nietzsche that reconstruct his works by theoretically systematizing his strategies, (alleged) beliefs, and developmental stages, but in passing, I want to express my agreement with Porter that in fact, Nietzsche did not outgrow or abandon his early philological scholarship when he turned the larger themes of his later work. It is an overstatement to claim, as he does, that “the Nietzsche of the later writings is not a philosopher but a critic of culture and its institutions . . . , not a free spirit but highly conscious of the delusion that any such freedom can only be . . . , not emancipated from cultural forms but [someone who] reminds his readers of their position as cultural subjects, and of his own as well” (*Nietzsche*, 8). Yet Porter is right to focus more on the question of *how Nietzsche became what he was* than on which alleged “theses” dominate the “periods” of his “career.” In this, I think he is somewhat more successful than Christian Benne, who presses the same point about the permanent importance of Nietzsche’s philological experience in all his works, but more in terms of the implications for literary scholarship (*Nietzsche und die Historisch-kritische Philologie* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005]). What is wrong, I think, is to settle for Porter’s somewhat one-dimensional conception of “who” the mature Nietzsche has become—as if cultural criticism, however broadly construed, were the primary thing to engage in if “science” is a problem. For the historical background to the controversies that were familiar to Nietzsche over the role of classical philology in German education, see Glenn W. Most, “The Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece for Life,” *Cultura tedesca* 20 (2002): 31–53. Most shows that quite aside from the question of its scientific value, German classicism in the nineteenth century (and the humanism traceable to Humboldt that is usually associated with it) is a manifestation of Germany’s rivalry with Rome-emulating French culture (42). Here one catches a glimpse of what is really at stake in the philological profession’s hostility toward Nietzsche. Any unorthodox interpretation of the ancients will be perceived as failing to properly reflect German cultural pride in its emulation of Greek culture as German classical philology interprets it and thus to be both unpatriotic and disrespectful of the “pedagogical value” of “truly German” philological research.
15. See, e.g., Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 144–61; and “Nietzsche’s Aesthetics and the Question of Hermeneutic Interpretation,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 4 (1986): 328–44. Focusing on the interplay between texts and interpretation, Alan Schrift discusses Nietzsche’s contribution to later hermeneutical philosophy in relation to his futile (and what he ultimately judged to be ill-conceived) efforts to “reform” philology (*Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* [London: Routledge, 1990], 159–68).
16. De Mul presents a nuanced comparison of what Dilthey and Nietzsche, but as is characteristic of his book, what takes center stage is alleged topics they both treat—i.e., life, introspection and the nature of psychology, and the value of historiography. Nietzsche is portrayed as lumping introspectionism, a concern for *Erlebnisse*, and the historical research of his era together as all so obsessed with the idea of objective truth that they cannot appreciate creative action. Dilthey is then depicted as retaliating by berating Nietzsche for his “lack of historical sense [sic]” and for the “self-centered character of his soul” which shows nothing but the “misery of exaggerated subjectivity”



- (*Tragedy of Finitude*, 205–17). De Mul does suggest, however, that in spite of his negative reaction to UM2, Dilthey may well have moved toward more historical and less psychological descriptions of *Verstehen* partly by Nietzsche's critique of the idea that what makes us most human is cultivating what is "inner" for us (215–16).
17. See my "Comte's Positivist Dream, Our Post-Positivist Burden," in *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Dean Moyer (New York: Routledge, 2010), 460–64.
  18. Plato, *Phaedo*, 60e, 1–7; BT, 75, 82. Regarding Nietzsche on music, see Stefan Lorenz Sorgner and Oliver Fürbeth, eds., *Music in German Philosophy: An Introduction*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 141–64; and the special issue on "Nietzsche and Music and The Will to Power: Current Debates," *New Nietzsche Studies* 1, nn. 1–2, (1996).
  19. The idea seems to go back to Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 395, but Kaufmann does not elaborate, and in my view, the work that satisfactorily spells this out has yet to be written. In what is probably the most widely cited English text on the Nietzsche-Socrates relation (one whose interpretations are unfortunately often compromised by a commitment to Straussian readings of the ancients), Werner Dannhauser establishes the crucial ground rules for such a work: At the very least, the figure of Socrates in Nietzsche's writings cannot be reduced to a representative of the "Socratism" that others subsequently found in his teachings; moreover, Nietzsche's relationship with Socrates is always as much the search for a way to affirm Socrates' role as the "first philosopher of life" as it is a struggle to undermine his status as founder of Western intellectualism and a practitioner of argumentation (*Nietzsche's View of Socrates* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974]). As noted in Chapter 2, Alexander Nehamas provides a less ideological but also thinner and less nuanced updating of the idea of Socrates as the model of a way of life rather than merely a way to reason.
  20. Hollingdale (EH, 119) translates *unterste* as "lowermost," but we really need something more old-fashioned and unrelated to *niederer*—which typically means low, base, mean, or vulgar, and shows up in compounds implying inferiority—because that is not at all its sense here. I therefore follow Kaufmann in rendering it "nethermost," with hopes of highlighting the fact that Nietzsche is referring here to "my" problematic *experience of his surroundings*, and not just to the "feelings" which might be inside him. I owe the soccer thought-experiment to Robert P. Crease, *The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 167.
  21. This "hermeneutical" reading of Nietzsche's changing faces has been put to good use not only by Heidegger but by a number of recent commentaries. I have already cited Schrift (n. 15), although I disagree with his tendency to Derridianize Nietzsche's path by conceiving its motivation as a "strategic deconstruction of opposition" (*Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*, 190)—which is no way to "become what you are." Lawrence J. Hatab seems closer to the mark in asking us to think of Nietzsche as engaged in a perpetual struggle to keep himself alive to (i.e., "recover") creative possibilities in a world "educated" to be otherwise. Hence, Hatab argues that the "motif of a self-consuming-prelude-to recovery operates throughout Nietzsche's writings" (*Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* [New York: Routledge, 2005], 35). Nietzsche's works thus have a point but no substantive thesis. We must "see the movements between (and even within) Nietzsche's texts as exhibiting a structure of deconstructive, agonistic tension, wherein certain perspectives perform a corrective,



delimiting role that is meant to *open* thought and prepare new movements, rather than exchange one form of thinking for another. . . . Yet all of this is a circulating process meant to enrich and advance cultural life, rather than a purely destructive dispersion” (36–37). The point is that whatever can be illuminated by scholarly attention to biography, authorial periods, theories, and arguments will be illuminating only to the extent that it helps us to interpret how Nietzsche saw “being historical” as a matter of living through an increasingly hyper-technoscientific age—the idea which is central in UM2 perhaps more than in any of his other works. Maybe Hatab is right that the spirit that animates this motif “culminates” in the notion of eternal occurrence, as the later Heidegger and others have claimed, even if one cannot find more than a few passages in which the actual words are found. In this chapter, however, I move in the opposite direction. If there is such a “motif” at all we must ask (as Heidegger does in SZ) what “understanding” of historicity is operating Nietzsche’s work that enables him to enact a conception of life’s possibilities so different from what is typical for the age.

22. See, e.g., Thomas H. Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Relationship to Historical Studies and Nineteenth Century German Historiography,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2007): 155–79; and regarding his education, reading habits, and early scholarship, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), esp. 43–50. The larger political issues that served as the cultural backdrop for these philological disputes are discussed in Christian J. Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On “Nutzen,” see n. 37.
23. Hence, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s (in)famous broadside, “‘Future Philology!’ A Replay to Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘The Birth of Tragedy,’” *New Nietzsche Studies* 4, no. 1 (2000): 1–32, constitutes a completely tin-eared review of a work that, although written by a professional philologist (and even—horrors!—containing factual errors), has as its primary cultural-critical purpose the demythologizing of precisely the supposedly “strictly scientific” (i.e., allegedly post-mythological) attitude so prominent among his fellow philologists . . . including, of course, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. “Anyone who has perused Friedrich Albert Lange’s stinging . . . critique of classical mythology, religion, and metaphysical beliefs in the opening pages of his *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* [2 vols., 2nd ed. (Iserlohn: Baedeker, 1873, 1875)], a work Nietzsche knew by heart and adored, will never again feel confident that Nietzsche ever intended his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, to be anything other than a mythology that is not to be believed in . . . ” (James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, 3). As Nietzsche says of the sheep (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff) in *Zarathustra*, “I have been heard least well by the most scholarly” (cited by Arrowsmith in *Unmodern Observations*, 314–15). For a recent example of classicists still taking offense at Nietzsche, see Jaap Mansfeld, “The Wilamowitz- Nietzsche Struggle: Another New Document and Some Further Comments,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 15, no. 1 (1986): 41–58.
24. Sheldon Pollock, “Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 934. Cf. “By philology, I mean the science of everything that depends on human volition: for example, all histories of the languages, customs, and deeds of various peoples in both war and peace” (Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, trans. David Marsh [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999], 5).
25. The echo of Comte, of course, is unmistakable. Like Dilthey (GS 1:99–101; 105–15 [SW 1:149–50; 154–65]), Nietzsche recognizes that the Comtean



- legacy defines the current understanding of science both internally and externally, and that whatever may be the case about its evolving particular procedures and specific findings, it is the acceptance of its model of knowledge and thus of the “mature” and knowledgeable human being by the larger culture that raises the deepest philosophical problems.
26. Brobjer stresses that for Nietzsche, the real problem with classical studies is not its methods or its scholarship, but its sense of itself, in conceiving of historical scholarship as a kind of end in itself, as if passing this sense on to students made them educated. Thus placing history “above philosophy” is a glaring example of scientism, which is Nietzsche’s real enemy (Brobjer, 2007).
  27. The point of doing science, says Comte, is “to dispense with direct [empirical] exploration, as much as the phenomena will permit, in order to warrant deduction of the greatest possible number of results from the smallest possible amount of immediately given data” (CPP1 (3), 131; also DEP, 16/19; SPP1, 518/419; SPP3, 24/21).
  28. Dirk R. Johnson, *Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 191–200. Johnson provides all the relevant information in this regard, but it must be pried loose from the author’s thesis that especially in Nietzsche’s mature works, anti-Darwinism is a fundamental philosophical motivation.
  29. UM2, 248/60. Given the point Nietzsche is making and given that he is speaking of herd animals, we might translate *Lust und Unlust* as just “likes and dislikes.” I doubt that it is an accident that this pair of terms figures prominently in Kant’s second and third Critiques, which argue that they take two forms in humans, viz., both subjective/sensual and intellectual. Maybe animals should be thought of here as having only the former . . . and thus being in no danger of possessing too much or too little “knowledge.”
  30. An newspaper ad from the early 1900s famously describes Carnation milk as coming from “contented cows.” Make what you will of Bill Cattlett and Roger Hadden’s extrapolation, *Contented Cows Still Give Better Milk: The Plain Truth about Employee Engagement and Your Bottom Line*, rev. ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2012).
  31. “Millions of us track ourselves all the time. We step on a scale and record our weight. We balance a checkbook. We count calories. But when the familiar pen-and-paper methods of self-analysis are enhanced by sensors that monitor our behavior automatically, the process of self-tracking becomes both more alluring and more meaningful. Automated sensors do more than give us facts; they also remind us that our ordinary behavior contains obscure quantitative signals that can be used to inform our behavior, once we learn to read them” (Gary Wolf, “The Data-Driven Life,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 2010, MM38); Emmanuel Gadenne. *Le guide pratique du Quantified Self. Mieux gérer sa vie, sa santé, sa productivité* (Limoges: FPY éditions, 2012).
  32. UM, 249/61. Commentators usually conclude that the idea of life as a historical-temporal process, or determinate becoming, emerges as a theme only after UM (Brobjer, 2004, 314–15), but as I show here, the inspiration for this idea is clearly found in UM2. Stambaugh argues, I think rightly, that one can trace a central concern with the question of time and the life process through all of Nietzsche’s works, but that a distinctive sense of time as lived, marked off sharply from the traditional notions of time and eternity, is not yet found in BT. See Joan Stambaugh, *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, trans. John F. Humphrey (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987), 38–56.
  33. “. . . human existence is just an uninterrupted having-been, a thing that lives by negating and consuming itself, by contradicting itself [. . . *Dasein nur ein*



- ununterbrochenes Gewesensein ist, ein Ding, das davon lebt, sich selbst zu verneinen und zu verzehren, sich selbst zu widersprechen]*" (UM2, 249/61).
34. I am therefore sympathetic with the translator's (unexplained) decision in the Stanford edition to render *unhistorisch* "ahistorical" whenever Nietzsche is clearly discussing human beings and not animals (*Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995], 87ff). Yet this strikes me as an overcorrection. In both German and English, unhistorical is unhistorical, and the point of Nietzsche's metaphor is to get us to see how human existence—with its forgetting, remembering, and never "quite" being able to just flourish without struggle—both does and does not resemble the conjured and enviable life of just following natural instincts. Nietzsche wants us to ponder this not-quite. Translating *unistorisch* as *ahistorical* makes the point too quickly.
  35. I ignore here an obviously important issue for Nietzsche scholarship, especially regarding his earlier works. In other passages in UM2, the superhistorical has a more positive role in life, insofar as its powers "lead the eye away from becoming towards that which bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable, towards art and religion" (330/120). Perhaps, however, "the very attempt to address history, not as a specific history, but as the historical as such, as historicity and its types, is to place oneself for a moment above the fleeting, conflictual appropriations of the past," so that Nietzsche has not so much "turned his back on the superhistorical man, instead he has, in his own way, fulfilled his aspirations" (Hans Ruin, "Blinding Vision—Nietzsche's Superhistorical Gaze," in *The Past's Present: Essays on the Historicity of Philosophical Thinking*, ed. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback and Hans Ruin [Huddinge: Södertörns Högskola, 2006], 141–42).
  36. I trust I will be forgiven for uncritically summarizing Nietzsche's broad-brush characterization of the spirit of nineteenth century positivism. Unfair as it may be to later scientific practice, it may well come much closer to depicting the image of science that drove contemporary pedagogy in his day—which is the issue, as I have explained, that he is most worried about when he hears his philological colleagues refer to themselves as the guardians of "modern" education. That this image is still very much alive in the culture and among the technocrats in the "developed" world is my theme in "'Empirical' Technoscience Studies in a Comtean World: Too Much Concreteness?" *Philosophy and Technology* 25, no. 2 (2012): 153–77.
  37. Jensen argues that the three kinds of history do nevertheless reflect recognizable lines of debate among German historians and philologists in late nineteenth century, and he rightly emphasizes that Nietzsche connects these debates not with epistemological issues but with the "instincts and motivations of the historians" (Jensen, "*Geschichte* or *Historie*?" 213, 221–27). Contrary to the argument I make here, however, Jensen interprets Nietzsche's critical engagement with these debates as driven primarily by a desire to improve historical scholarship and does not consider Nietzsche's larger concerns about turning the study of the past into a "science."
  38. *Unfashionable Observations* (1995). Although there seems to be no variant for *nützlich*, especially in older dictionaries, *Nutzen* and *Nützen* are sometimes listed separately, with the latter term linked more specifically to instrumentalist meanings of useful (e.g., profitable, utilitarian), which makes "utility" a poor choice here. Moreover, the translator's rendering "*unzeitgemäß*" as "unfashionable" also seems problematic, at least for those of us who want to see something more than cultural criticism or professional self-improvement in UM. But Gray's decision is deliberate. Fashionableness, he observes, links UM directly with the project of cultural criticism, which he



- takes to be “the primary focus” of UM (396) That “untimely” has a smaller semantic reach than “unfashionable,” that it sometimes denotes awkward and inappropriate intervention, and that Nietzsche knew that some people would feel criticized by UM (398–99) seem to me insufficient reasons for choosing a translation that buries the reference to time and temporality. Indeed, as I am arguing, this reference may well be the central and perhaps even the one genuinely extra-modern philosophical issue in (if not explicitly of) UM2.
39. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche’s familiarity with German translations of English utilitarians like John Stuart Mill was much greater than usually assumed (*Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 102–8). Nietzsche seems to have been primarily concerned to sharpen his opposition to Mill’s ethics, especially his commonsense (and therefore shallow) conception of happiness and his tendency to judge utility consequentially. See Thomas H. Brobjer, *Nietzsche and the “English”: The Influence of British and American Thinking on His Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), ch. 9, esp. 202–19. Nietzsche was being called “the German pragmatist” as early as 1908 (René Berthelot, “Sur le pragmatisme de Nietzsche [I, II, III],” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 16, no. 4 [1908], 17, no. 4 [1909], 17, no. 5 [1909]: 403–47, 386–412, 654–702).
  40. Actually, as I explain in Chapter 8, this is not quite true. The last three pages of §10 return—a bit unsteadily—to the positive note struck at the beginning, with Nietzsche saying that he joins the company of “hopeful youth” who might still fend off the debilitating effects of a scientific education.
  41. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112 (Part II, “On Redemption”).
  42. UM2, 258/67, my emphasis. As I discuss shortly, the “above all” is ambiguous.
  43. UM2, 264–65/72, my emphasis. This is one of the few passages in which Nietzsche conceives the advantages to the three histories separately and thus from a Heideggerian perspective, misses an opportunity to consider their relationship and “unity.” See Charles Bambach, “History and Ontology: A Reading of Nietzsche’s Second Untimely Meditation,” *Philosophy Today* 34, no. 2 (1990): 259–72.
  44. Thus, Karl Löwith observes, Nietzsche is “more of his own time than he desired to be, precisely because his stance toward it was polemical, untimely” (*From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, rev. ed., trans. David E. Green [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 200). Yet this popularization of Heidegger’s interpretation remains an overstatement, precisely because it never asks, as the early Heidegger does and as I do here, whether Nietzsche’s “desires” also constitute an “understanding” he could not adequately articulate.
  45. UM2, 325/116, emphasis altered.
  46. See, e.g., UM2, 258/67 and 332/122 (“... to the ends of life, employ the past in its three senses ...”). In both passages, Nietzsche makes no effort to specify the prominence of any one.
  47. On the priority of the future in UM2, see Stambaugh, *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, 52–56.
  48. For discussion of Nietzsche’s tendency to characterize the experienced present as offering a “decisive moment”—an occasion for the creative transformation of where one has arrived and where life, when it is confronted honestly without moral or metaphysical blinkers, is never quite satisfactory—see Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the “Decisive Moment” in 19th and 20th Century Philosophy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 35–68. Ward links Nietzsche with both Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition and Heidegger’s analysis of Zarathustra to highlight the sense of temporality that runs



through the last 150 years of continental philosophy. Robin Small's analysis of *Zarathustra's* association of "the way of greatness" with a special notion of "the hour" in "The Wanderer" makes the same point. Small's claim that this notion is Nietzsche's "ultimate temporal paradigm" is undoubtedly overdrawn, but what he says happens in it seems right: "Instead of excluding past and future, the hour draws them into itself, so that they no longer oppose each other . . . but rather dwell together. If a present is caught between these opponents and is unable to withstand them, it is reduced to the instantaneity of the moment. The hour prevents such an outcome by encompassing past and future, by providing a place for them to dwell together. . . ." (*Time and Becoming in Nietzsche's Thought* [New York: Continuum, 2010], 159–60). Also, William McNeill, *The Glance of the Eye: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Ends of Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 221–38. McNeill broadens the conversation by analyzing the way the idea of a decisive moment of vision or insight informs Western philosophical conceptions of knowledge and practice quite generally.

49. On the prominence of the past in Nietzsche's more explicit conception of time—a conception that, unlike the lived temporality I am discussing here (and Stambaugh calls "historical time"), runs through most of his works and is more easily linked to Nietzsche's later notions of the Eternal Return and the Will to Power—see *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, 38–42, 172–75. As Stambaugh stresses, this more explicit sense of time is typically (a) presumed, not discussed, and (b) as a variation on the notion of a process of becoming, is more closely allied with traditional notions of time than with the temporality displayed in the early sections of UM2. See also, Robin Small, *Time and Becoming in Nietzsche's Thought*, 17–54; and John Richardson, "Nietzsche on Time and Becoming," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 208–29.
50. One might desire "to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate, in opposition to that in which one did originate," but attempts to thus "implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature" often fail, "because second natures are usually weaker than first" (UM2, 270/76–77). The metaphor of first and second natures can illustrate either a creative failure—in which case, the attempt to establish a second nature does not overcome its initial weakness—or creative success—in which case, one enacts the truth in Nietzsche's reminder that, after all, "every first nature was at one time a second nature and every victorious second nature will become a first" (270/77).
51. See UM2, esp. §4, for Nietzsche's lengthy polemics concerning the way his era encourages an intellectualism that leaves its victims split off "internally" (where much energy is expended and consequent pride results) from the "externalities" of their active life and practices. Commentators have tried to find either a consistent diagnosis of German culture here—e.g., the inevitable crudeness and conventionalism of people who judge their worth in terms of what they know—or alternatively, proof of his immature reliance on Schopenhauer and the idealization of art. I suggest instead that we should let all the hyperbole, inconsistency, and negativity of the later sections of UM2 stand and ask, how did Nietzsche always seem to know, upon further reflection, not to leave it at that?
52. Hence, I cannot follow Stambaugh's claim that "in a discussion of these three relations it is not so important to differentiate them one from the other as it is to present the common inherent structure of a relation to the past" (*The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, 48). To be sure, taken one by one, each type of history does display a distinctive attitude toward the past; but this ignores



the way the proper measure of each history's advantage "for life" is found in the unity formed by inspiration, reverence, and dissatisfaction working together in creative practice.

53. Perhaps the most extensive evaluation of Nietzsche in this vein is that of Habermas, who complains that by elevating his entirely justified rejection of philosophies grounded in the image of the individual subjective consciousness into an entirely unjustified totalizing rant against reason, Nietzsche undermines our ability to see rationality as the source of a critical and intersubjective alternative philosophical outlook and thus paves the way for the various postmodern irrationalisms from which we now suffer (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987], 83–105). For Habermas, a fundamental sign of the "exhaustion" of the modern philosophies of consciousness is the "hectic to and fro" one sees in post-Enlightenment thinkers between "radically reflective self-renewal and confrontation with something unyielding" (296). Such purely external interpretations as Habermas' only make rescuing something from Nietzsche that does not display this "dialectic" seem all the more worthwhile.



## 7 Heidegger

### The Problem of History as Pre-Philosophical

In his 1957 American Philosophical Association Presidential Address, Quine concludes his remarks about the evolution of conceptual schemes and the ultimate impossibility of translating them with this observation. “I philosophize from the vantage point only of our own provincial conceptual scheme and scientific epoch, true; but I know no better.”<sup>1</sup> Quine intends to convey modesty here, both insofar as his address merely “stemmed from my work in progress, which in 1960 became *Word and Object*,” and because he wants to be seen as denying himself any access to an Archimedean point from which something like The Ultimate Translation Process could be conducted.<sup>2</sup> Yet at the same time, his remarks reflect the self-confidence of someone who is used to speaking as a mainstream authority—that is, someone for whom “object,” “representation,” “conceptual scheme,” “translation,” etc., are all presumed to have largely settled meanings and are understood to be the standard conceptual tools for analyzing all “talking and thinking” about anyone’s surroundings. In its own way, then, Quine’s seemingly modest acknowledgement of his own historicity functions almost as effectively as would the actual assertion of Archimedean omnipotence. For in speaking “from the vantage point only of *our own* provincial conceptual scheme and *scientific* epoch,” he implies that any basic opposition to his way of philosophizing could only come from an alien source—not an overlapping culture but a foreign land that is neither “ours” nor “scientific.” Indeed, Quine assures us that aliens and heathens, too, must be “talkers and thinkers” like us, so that even if conceptual schemes are untranslatable, “schemes” in his technical sense they must always be. Hence, “we” in our “scientific” epoch may be unable to know any better than we do, but philosophically speaking, “they” are almost certain to know less.<sup>3</sup>

In the present context, such a display of philosophical self-possession should certainly give us an uncomfortable pause.<sup>4</sup> Quine ends his talk with a resolute affirmation of the “scientific epoch” he inhabits and the conceptual scheme it inspires. He is confident, as we might say, that something like Comte’s final stage of intellectual development has arrived, and we are it. We have seen, however, that Dilthey and Nietzsche both raise strong objections to philosophy’s adoption of this resolute stance—indeed, they depict



genuine philosophy as actually starting at the point where Quine is satisfied to stop. Where Quine finds satisfaction in the conviction that “our” philosophy should be modeled after [natural] science, they see instead the unjustified promotion of epistemological and cultural scientism. Hence, for Dilthey and Nietzsche, if “we” ever hope to do more than merely enact some further variation of the pinched and reductive philosophical outlook that we inherit and that Quine embraces, we must learn how to cultivate something very different from his mock humility about the superiority of “our province.” Otherwise, says Dilthey, a positivist preference for interpreting all knowledge on the model of naturalistic explanation will continue to impede development of any science of historical understanding. And also otherwise, adds Nietzsche, if the favored outlook of a science-minded philosophy becomes the template for the “educated” mind as such, we can expect little more from the human future than socio-political conformity, inauthentic and pedestrian lives, and whole cultures proficient in processing information but lacking any genuine art or culture.

Dilthey and Nietzsche are thus in general agreement about the nature of the problem: Remaining happy residents of Quine’s province encourages us to privilege a kind of rationality that has lost its feel for historical-human “life.” It is undoubtedly a good thing to develop objective accounts for what is the case; but that is something very different from understanding what it *means* to us. Of course, philosophers who favor modeling all thought on objective explanation have already silently demoted the very concern for this latter kind of understanding. At best, they say, it expresses a subordinate and merely personal interest in what is objectively the case; at worst, it betrays a romantic and irrational reaction to the triumph of reason over emotion and dogma. Surface readings of Dilthey and Nietzsche might even appear to justify this subjectivist interpretation. After all, Dilthey does say that natural science studies what is really out there, and human science, what is “inner” and “psychical.” And Nietzsche is forever complaining, not about the empirical findings of science itself but about the unsuitability of the scientific “attitude” for living a creative life.

Yet as we have seen in the previous two chapters, such interpretations listen to Dilthey and Nietzsche’s words, without hearing their real point or recognizing its implications. Granted that both thinkers often argue their case by means of negative and polemical variations on objectivist ideas (e.g., natural science is observational and human science, empathic; scientific knowing is detached and creative thinking, engaged). Yet Dilthey and Nietzsche are not at all as philosophically defensive as their sometimes oppositional language suggests. Neither would be satisfied if we continued to privilege objective thought and “scientific” philosophy, but then went on to accept the idea that understanding human beings and their history is also interesting, or that it is desirable to take creative advantage of objective knowledge once we have it. To the Dilthey who defends two kinds of science from the standpoint of life and to the Nietzsche who would have



life measure science rather than the reverse, offering a belated two cheers for first-person supplements to third-person Truth is in principle no better than their outright suppression. In the end, Dilthey and Nietzsche are not primarily interested in undermining the hegemony of one kind of human practice (i.e., natural-scientific explanation) in order to privilege another (i.e., human-scientific understanding or creative self-fashioning). Their concern is what Heidegger will call “fundamental-ontological”; that is, both point toward a thorough-going philosophical reconsideration of the relation between “life” and *all* of its articulations—whether these articulations are “sciences,” or creative and artistic activities, or whatever.

But now what? The implied next move is neither simple nor obvious, and although Dilthey and Nietzsche point toward it, neither of them is appropriately positioned to make it. What, exactly, would it take to philosophically reconsider, not simply the specific relation between two kinds of science, or even the general relation between any science and the “living person” (UM2, 258/67), but rather the relation between life and any possible articulation? In Heidegger’s early language, philosophers who ask this question will have to be differently “disposed toward” scientific practice and toward creative self-fashioning than either Dilthey or Nietzsche. These philosophers will have to ask, how does one think “from out of the standpoint of life itself,” and what “motivates” someone come to inhabit this orientation? Dilthey’s and Nietzsche’s writings point in the direction of these questions, but neither explicitly considers them. Both frequently speak *about* life’s standpoint, but they do so *only in light of the particular purposes they have already chosen*, and then typically in variants of traditional philosophical language which fail to do even that purpose full justice. What we learn from them about the character of life’s standpoint is thus more negative and suggestive than positive and explicit. Both thinkers oppose scientism and philosophical objectivism. Both see that philosophy cannot settle for an outlook that models itself on nineteenth century physics or on any other articulation of the basically Cartesian ontology of knowing selves and external entities. And both know that human beings do not think like gods, from Nowhere. Having come this far, however, they leave the phenomenon of being “alive” itself, of “living through life” in a determinately historical way—that is, of having an existence characterized by what Heidegger eventually calls historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*)—philosophically unclear. Together they *show* us but cannot *tell* us that the “problem of history” is ultimately neither an epistemic problem for science nor the existential problem of taking proper advantage of science, but rather is a question of how history matters to and in philosophical inquiry itself. How, then, do we go on from what they have shown?

As already discussed in Chapter 5, I take my cue here from Heidegger, who says in SZ that he is “appropriating Dilthey’s labors” (SZ, 397). In that discussion, my focus was on what Heidegger thinks he already finds in Dilthey. Now I want to consider Heidegger’s interpretation of what he



finds there and how he thinks he can carry it forward.<sup>5</sup> I address this question in my final two chapters. In these chapters, I return to Heidegger's "destructive retrievals" of Dilthey and Nietzsche which were already begun in Chapters 5 and 6, in order to draw some conclusions about how history matters to philosophy and how we can understand that it does. We saw earlier that it is Dilthey who opens up the space for understanding more fully and directly how it is that we "are" historical by interpreting both kinds of scientific practice as "expressions of life," but that it is Nietzsche who highlights what is philosophically at stake in properly understanding this temporality, so that we can "become what we are."<sup>6</sup> Each thinker thus displays more understanding of how it is to be historical than their explicit philosophical self-interpretations permit them to say. Both of them together offer us a chance to *retrieve* the legacy of this understanding by *destructively* minimizing the continuing influence of their still-too-traditional modes of presenting it. In this chapter, I show how Heidegger contrasts Dilthey's final conception of "understanding life in its own terms" with the phenomenologically less satisfactory conceptions found in Natorp and Husserl, in order to establish the sort of hermeneutical "attitude" that surpasses all three. In Chapter 8, I return to UM2 and to Heidegger's suggestion that if we make explicit the special sense of temporality that silently structures Nietzsche's analysis of how to "take advantage" of the three histories, we place ourselves in a better position to follow out Dilthey's proto-phenomenological promise.

## IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF REFLECTION (NATORP)

How then, do we retrieve Dilthey's question of historical life? The short answer is, by learning to philosophize "from life's own standpoint," and by realizing that this cannot be accomplished "reflectively" in any traditional sense. The longer answer, found in Heidegger's early lecture courses, is as follows.

As we have seen, there is good reason not to let Dilthey's self-descriptions guide our interpretation of his actual accomplishments. To do so, argues Heidegger, would be to miss Dilthey's "ownmost philosophical tendency":

Epistemological, historico-scientific, and hermeneutic-psychological investigations are forever overlapping and interpenetrating [in his work]. Wherever one aim predominates, the others are already the motive and the means. What looks like disunity and an unsure, haphazard "trying things out," is really an elemental restiveness [*Unruhe*] in the direction of the one goal: *to understand "life" philosophically and to secure for this understanding a hermeneutical grounding in terms of life itself.*<sup>7</sup>



The author we see in Dilthey's writings, says Heidegger, is no epistemologist of human science, and life is not his "object." Rather, this Dilthey is "on the way toward the *question* of 'life'"—that is, the question of how anything and everything "is" for us in lived experience, such that we might understand it in its own terms.<sup>8</sup> In 1927, Heidegger goes so far as to state flatly that SZ's chapter on historicity and temporality is concerned solely (*einzig*) with "furthering the pioneering investigations of Dilthey."<sup>9</sup> Yet except in §77, Dilthey is infrequently mentioned in SZ; hence for decades this strong assertion was either ignored, along with much else Heidegger says in §§72–76, or dismissed as hyperbole.<sup>10</sup> But with Heidegger's early lecture courses now available, it is possible to do much better.<sup>11</sup>

To begin with, SZ's calling "elemental restiveness" the key to interpreting Dilthey is no haphazard choice. It recalls a whole cluster of still earlier notions from the years 1920–22, in terms of which Heidegger returns repeatedly to the question of the "how" of a distinctly phenomenological philosophical practice, in order to work out his own sense that the motivation for such philosophizing arises from a disquietude (*Beunruhigung*) or distressfulness (*Bekümmern*) in factual life experience. The connection between Dilthey's displays of restiveness concerning how to understand life in its own terms and Heidegger's question of how to understand Dasein is direct and profound.<sup>12</sup> Above all, then, we should note well "who" it is that takes up Dilthey's question. It is SZ's aspiring "universally" concerned and "hermeneutically" oriented phenomenologist—that is, someone who is emphatically not interested in realizing any particular "regional" goal such as defending the historico-human sciences. For this thinker, the "initial" question—inspired, obviously, by Dilthey's idea that life can be understood in its own terms and from its own standpoint—is how to become the sort of philosopher who is capable of articulating any phenomenon, precisely as it appears in the living-through of life, without playing ontological favorites, and "*before* there is any shaping of experience into the tasks of theoretical research" (GA 59:170/130, my emphasis). But this "before" raises a problem. For many modern philosophers, reflective knowledge of either the self or what is external to the self by definition requires some sort of critical distance from the immediacy of ordinary experience.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Heidegger thinks Dilthey has shown us that a philosophically significant, pre-theoretical awareness is indeed possible. That it might seem impossible, he blames on the perspective of its opponents.

Heidegger's early conception of a pre-theoretical awareness that is formed "from out of factual life itself" obviously echoes (and radically extends) Dilthey's description of the "immediate [or "reflexive" or perhaps "self-"] awareness [*Innewerden*]" we have of our lives before we develop any kind of deliberate, purposeful, and cognitively reflective consciousness. As Dilthey puts it in this characteristic passage, experience as it is lived through is



a distinctive and characteristic mode in which reality is there-for-me. A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given *to* me [e.g., introspectively or reflectively], but the reality of lived experience is there-*for*-me because I have a reflexive awareness [*Innewerden*] of it, because I possess it directly as in some sense belonging to me. (GS 6:313/SW 5:223, my emphasis)

There is probably no entirely satisfactory way to translate “*Innewerden*,” especially in a philosophical atmosphere in which anything labeled “inner” is immediately set over against what is outer and assigned a lower ontological status. What Dilthey wants to stress is that “becoming conscious” or aware of experiencing is itself a directly lived experience and thus not yet something appropriately characterized as either inner or outer or theoretical or pre-theoretical. No matter my situation, no matter its particular what and how, is already meaningfully “there” for me pre-theoretically, without any need of the familiar machinery of subject-object, act-content, self-other, etc. “Becoming aware” of its all-being-there-for-me is *Innewerden*, and together with the lived experiencing of which it is the awareness, this is “how matters are for us” regardless of what conceptual divisions seem, upon further consideration, to be “motivated” by it. There is thus nothing “inner” about *Innewerden*—if by “inner” one means subjective—that is, inside rather than outside the body—or involving feeling rather than rational response. At the same time, there is something “inward” about “*inne-*” if one means, as Dilthey clearly does mean, that experiential life is something one is forever “in the midst of” and so only becomes truly aware of “from within” and as “mine.” This aspect of “*inne-*” is lost in SW’s translation as “reflexive awareness,” which is further handicapped by the fact that “reflexion” is a British variant of “reflection,” and in both British and American analytic philosophy, “reflexivity” has well-established and sophisticated logical and grammatical connections with alleged paradoxes of self-reference and the problem of the justification of a priori principles.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the distinction between lived experience and thinking about lived experience is perfectly obvious, but the nature of this distinction is not. From the perspective of many modern philosophers, proto-phenomenologists like Dilthey and phenomenological philosophers like Husserl or Heidegger appear to take a very unphilosophical turn when they defend a pre-theoretical form of this distinction—or claim, for example, that there can be a philosophically significant consciousness of lived experience that is without distance from it. The criticism is, I think, ultimately agenda-driven and unconvincing, but the target is rightly identified. Both Dilthey and Heidegger think genuine philosophy engages in “immanent illumination of life experience itself that remains in this experience and does not step out and turn it into objectivity” (GA 59:171/131). Heidegger defends this possibility at length in several early lecture courses, using Natorp as his foil. On the one hand, he praises Natorp for drawing attention to the issue, and especially



for framing it as a question of whether a “pretheoretical” and “immediate” sort of reflection is even viable.<sup>15</sup> Natorp, he says, is the one neo-Kantian who sees that when it comes to the relationship between the sheer having of experience and its conceptualization, philosophers should attend as much to the former as they now do to the latter. He criticizes Kant for having “gone forward” toward an analysis of the conditions for the objectification of experience without first “turning back” to reflect on the character of the subjective givenness of that experience. Moreover, Natorp argues, the question about the manner in which lived experience is directly had should be made a problem in its own right and not just for the sake of grounding the theoretical sciences (GA 59:92–93/73–74).

On the other hand, Heidegger rejects Natorp’s own approach to this problem. Natorp describes his account of experiential immediacy as a kind of “inversion” of the normal process by which experience objectifies itself. Like any knowledge-seeking enterprise, philosophy usually confines its epistemic task to analyzing the laws of objectification, sometimes adding an account of the process of objectification these laws facilitate. Hence, if anyone asks how this is experienced, the standard reply is either to propose an objectifying explanation of the process (e.g., in terms of brain physiology, cognitive structures, or laws of association) or else, more candidly, to admit that because we have no immediate “reflective” access to this experience, we cannot have knowledge of it. Natorp sees himself as offering a third option, something he calls “subjectification” (to pair with objectification), which involves recasting Kant’s claim that there can be no self-knowledge. On the one hand, he agrees that

in the end, one apparently never grasps the subjective, as such, in itself. On the contrary, in order to grasp it scientifically, one is forced to strip it of its subjective character. One kills subjectivity in order to dissect it, and believes that the life of the soul is on display in the result of the dissection!<sup>16</sup>

Yet on the other hand, even if we cannot have “knowledge” of the subjective, what we can do is perform a kind of regressive analysis that moves back from our objectifications toward the lived unity of experiencing as it was prior to its being theoretically dissected. At least this way, Natorp concludes, the subjective process whose objectifications give us knowledge can be “reconstructed.”

For Heidegger, there is an obvious flaw in Natorp’s project. If he were right that we never directly grasp life in its experiential immediacy, so that it is available to us only in backward-logical reconstructions, then we would be in the paradoxical position of conceptualizing something without prior understanding of what we are conceptualizing. Moreover, since Natorp holds that all philosophical conceptualization is objectification (i.e., theoretical representation), his reconstruction would amount to



a conception of something that by definition cannot have one. Clearly, says Heidegger,

Natorp's systematic, pan-logical orientation denies him any free access to the sphere of lived experience, to consciousness. For him this [consciousness] remains essentially the theorizing consciousness of objects, resolved into the lawfulness of constitution.<sup>17</sup>

Some philosophers, having identified this paradox in Natorp's account, might congratulate themselves and move on, but as Heidegger's careful choice of words indicates, he thinks there are more instructive options. In the first place, when he describes Natorp as expressing a philosophical tendency, or attitude, or even as having a standpoint, he is not reducing him to the instantiation of an explicit view or position. Natorp, after all, is not dense. He realizes perfectly well that he must defend reconstruction as being a fundamentally different *sort* of conceptualization than theoretical construction in the usual sense.<sup>18</sup> For Heidegger, the question is not about what Natorp—rightly or mistakenly—thinks he knows and consciously embraces. It is about what he seems to understand with such assurance that it “stubbornly asserts itself against every theoretical line of argument that is brought on, and indeed does so as a *living conviction*, growing within factual experience.”<sup>19</sup> The answer to this question gives us something to retrieve from Natorp, instead of simply leaving his explicit position dismantled. What Heidegger actually says is that Natorp's neo-Kantian commitments “deny him *free access*” to the sphere of lived experience. He does not say that Natorp's access is blocked or cut off (as the English translation of *verwehrt* unfortunately has it). Indeed, the latter statement is antithetical to Heidegger's idea of destructive retrieval. All *articulations* of experience—even those that dissect it, place it under laws, and draw our attention away from its immediacy and unity—are nevertheless, *as phenomena*, always also articulations *of experience*. This is something phenomenology learns from Dilthey, who had already argued that *expressions* of life, when understood, must always be regarded precisely as expressions *of life*.

Thus on the one hand, Natorp's philosophical access to lived experience is certainly circumscribed by his having taken up the traditional orientation of a theorizing consciousness. Yet his very insistence that there is “something” here that is sufficiently available to objectification to make at least a “*re-constructive*” account of it possible has implications he would never assert. He is willing to interpret theoretical apprehension pluralistically, now as constructive, now reconstructive, sometimes logical and sometimes psychological. What he is not prepared to accept is that theoretical apprehension—as a way to express or articulate or conceptualize the sphere of immediate experience—“does not exhaust all the possibilities” (GA 56/57:108/109).

Hence on the other hand, laments Heidegger, like so many critics of phenomenology Natorp approaches its call “to the things themselves” from



a preconceived position, and as with the others, “whether their position is transcendental, empirically psychological, or neo-Hegelian . . . *phenomenology’s fundamental demand to bracket all standpoints is everywhere overlooked*” (109/92, author’s emphasis). Ultimately, Natorp not only fails to “reach” lived experience with his reconstruction of subjectivity. By placing this reconstruction in a *General Psychology* and insisting (somewhat obscurely) that it is nevertheless a logical rather than merely psychological account, he shows that his basic philosophical “motivation” is and remains theoretical-scientific throughout.<sup>20</sup> The basic “tendency” of Natorp’s approach is the familiar modern mode of cognitive apprehension (*Erfassung*) in which one grasps and pins down the essence or inner logic of something so that one really knows it instead of merely having it subjectively. In spite of his deeper and more promising tendency to the contrary, Natorp remains a neo-Kantian for whom

the question of how lived experiences are had is taken at the outset to be a question of the method of attaining knowledge, so that as a question of method it is made part of the general problem of establishing methods, and thereby gets fixed as a theoretical relation of apprehension in terms of an overarching and essentially counter-directed problematic. (GA 59:112/87, 114/89)

Natorp’s reconstruction of the sphere of experience thus remains as “formal” as the objective and representational language in which he gives this account. He remains an Epistemologist with a capital “E” in Charles Taylor’s sense. For Heidegger, seeing this “counter-direction” for what it is puts us in a position where we can better understand why Dilthey does better—better, certainly, than Husserl.

## HUSSERL’S PRINCIPLE OF PRINCIPLES

As noted in Chapter 5, Heidegger criticisms of Husserl’s phenomenology are directed primarily at his view of what phenomenology is, not at what phenomenology attempts to do. Husserl sees phenomenology as a movement, he says, whereas we ought to look to its greater possibilities. Understanding the nature of Heidegger’s critique is important here, because it is in the process of developing it that he explains why he finds the phenomenological “tendency” of Dilthey’s investigations to be more radical (and thus more retrievable), not only and rather obviously than Natorp’s, but also and less obviously than Husserl’s.<sup>21</sup>

Above all, Heidegger objects to Husserl’s “theoretical-scientific attitude,” displayed in all its glory in the famous 1911 *Logos* article. In it, Husserl famously defends his plan to make phenomenology the genuine philosophical alternative not only to scientific naturalism but to philosophy



popularly conceived as *Weltanschauung*-formation (by, e.g., Dilthey, Simmel, and Spengler). The best the latter can achieve, he argues, is a relativistic totalization of the times that mimics the historicist's eagerness to lose oneself in "the marvelous wealth of external and internal forms that grow and transform themselves . . . in the empirical life of the human spirit," and that therefore settle for a pseudo-scientifically fabricated system of currently inherited riches that "harmoniously satisfies both intellect and feeling." Real philosophy, says Husserl, cannot ground itself in the study of what others have done or what the culture tells us. Genuine philosophy—that is, phenomenological philosophy—must "attain its own absolutely clear beginnings" (PRS, 196), by taking the stance of a reflective, transcendental-rational consciousness, establishing a "pure" and methodologically secure outlook, and thus becoming a "rigorously scientific" philosophy of "intuitions" that finally gets us to the things themselves as they really are.<sup>22</sup>

As appealing as this cry for "authentic" philosophy always is, says Heidegger, the apparent display of absolutism in Husserl's appeal ultimately threatens (and not without reason) to drive opponents toward the very ideas that he opposes and that worldview theory espouses.<sup>23</sup> For in spite of its widespread misinterpretation, there actually is something "contingent and relative" about philosophy, and ignoring or rejecting the idea outright always leads to some version of four recurring objections, namely, that philosophical claims (1) can never be final because they are shaped by their milieu, (2) can never be genuinely consensual because they are the opinions of individuals, (3) are always determined more by persuasion than argument, and (4) are forever being displaced by other opinions based on new principles resting on different foundations (GA 58:141/108–9; 234/176–77). Manifestos for phenomenology that promise that it will be more scientific and radical and altogether worthy of universal assent only strengthen the suspicion that it, too, is just one more worldview.

Husserl protested that Heidegger's critique of his *Logos* article makes unfair use of an essay designed as more polemical than substantive.<sup>24</sup> For Heidegger, however, this response misses his point. What really matters, he says, is the article's "basic direction," and in this respect, the position Husserl stakes out so boldly in this essay is no different than in his more detailed "programmatic explanations and methodological presentations" at the time. The point is, they all convey the false impression that "a new school had arisen in European philosophy" and that "through phenomenology a beginning of philosophy was being claimed that rejected all previous thinking" (GA 14:85/77–78). Of course, Heidegger agrees with Husserl that genuine philosophizing is not worldview-construction.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in these years he is even willing to call phenomenology a science, albeit the *Urwissenschaft*.<sup>26</sup> But what this means cannot be determined by rejecting worldview theory and throwing another philosophy with a different definition up against it.<sup>27</sup> Not only does this tactic convey the wrong impression; it



implies something impossible, namely, that philosophy moves by rejecting and replacing previous philosophies. One of the strengths of phenomenology, says Heidegger, is that unlike other philosophies, instead of “relapsing back into the familiar pattern of [successive] standpoints and worldviews,” it can actually take up objections such as those of Natorp and the worldview-philosophers and “make them its own.” Indeed, its promise lies precisely in furthering its own development, not by taking a stand against its critics but by making “the radical attempt to eradicate the deficiencies . . . in their objections by actually *realizing the motivating ideal of each objection*” (GA 58:141/109, my emphasis). Put bluntly, Husserl’s critics have a telling point, and no analysis of flaws in their presentation of this point can get rid of it. Finding the logical weaknesses in someone else’s objections (which is always possible) and touting one’s own strength (which is also always possible) may further careers and foster movements, but it is an ultimately fruitless and “unoriginal” strategy that merely suppresses the legitimate issues that motivate the critics and guarantees that one’s own motivation experiences no growth.

Given the frequently sharp language of Heidegger’s criticisms, it is important to emphasize this display of hermeneutics-by-destructive-retrieval that is evident in them nonetheless. For in Heidegger’s opinion, the “motivational basis” of Husserl’s reactions to worldview philosophy is actually sound, but *as reactions*, they are “already deformations of the basic experience of all phenomenology” (GA 58:142/109; cf. 18–24/13–17). There are important questions here. What is this “basic experience”? How, in terms of this experience, does phenomenology actually come to conduct itself in a “rigorously scientific” way such that it functions like a primordial science? And then how, in its “originality,” might it make the objections of the neo-Kantians (about the need for theoretical reflection) and worldview philosophers (about the illusion of philosophical universality and certainty) “its own”? Why, of all philosophies, is phenomenology able to address the four traditional objections to philosophy? We must start by making a *problem* out of these issues (GA 56/57:23–25). Too often, Husserl speaks of phenomenology as if it *simply is* primordial science and *simply does* achieve the proper philosophical attitude, and as if “bracketing” our allegiances to particular object-domains and to our usual beliefs about nature generally *simply is* that way to succeed. *What* his multi-stage, phenomenologically reductive bracketing process actually consists in—this question Husserl comes back to repeatedly. But *that* this process marks the one road to a truly originary science that is not just one more science or one more worldview—of this we read much less, and even then mostly in the form of a quick explanation of phenomenology’s improvement over some other outlook. Even if for no other reason, says Heidegger, Husserl’s lifelong pride in being “scientific” and having nothing to do with the “profound speculations of wisdom” should already persuade him to place phenomenology itself on the agenda for careful questioning.<sup>28</sup>



In the early lecture courses, Heidegger sometimes argues that Husserl's account of phenomenology does not seem expressive of his own "principle of all principles." As Husserl famously puts it in *Ideas I*, §24,

No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that *every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition*, that *everything originarily* (so to speak, in its 'personal' actuality) *offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being*, but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there*.<sup>29</sup>

In light of this principle, argues Heidegger, Husserl's descriptions of how phenomenology comes to be phenomenology are filled with problematic epistemic and ontological imagery. For example, regarding the slogan, "to the things themselves," how does one *go toward* something when one is supposed to be intuitively ready to "*accept* what is given, simply as it presents itself to be"? And how was it decided that in phenomenology it is a *transcendental consciousness* that does the accepting, and that it does so in intuitive *acts* and employs a reflective *method*? Isn't all of this merely a variation on very traditional and unphenomenological themes? It all sounds as if one achieves a phenomenological standpoint and comes upon the phenomenal field, if not with specific "theoretical" commitments like the neo-Kantians, then at least with an attitude that has been deliberately and fundamentally altered from that of natural experience. Even if this alteration is not performed in order to cognitively complete or rationalize natural experience, it appears at least to be radically "modified" from its initially naïve sense. "Husserl says . . . I never get to my experience [while] in the 'natural attitude.' I first turn myself toward my experience in the act of reflecting on my experiences" (GA 58:251/189). But what sort of preparatory step is this? What is the status of this reflective turning-toward? On what grounds can Husserl say that this is not a fundamental alteration of and distancing from the sphere of experience?<sup>30</sup>

Natorp urges Husserl to make more rather than less of this idea that philosophical reflection must "set experiences out" before us, so we can make a previously unexamined sphere of experience into an object. For Natorp, even when the aim of reflection is reconstructive rather than constructive, it constitutes a theoretical orientation—in Heidegger's words, a "devivifying" act in which "life-experiences are no longer lived but looked at." But is it really a necessity in philosophy that "the stream of lived experiences is stilled and . . . becomes a series of individually intended objects"?<sup>31</sup> The fact that Natorp criticizes Husserl for not moving further in this direction can only mean that he thinks Husserl already basically shares it. Of course, we know that Husserl rejects this line of argument and wants to defend a non- or pre-theoretical phenomenological reflection. Yet as Heidegger shows with numerous citations from *Ideas I*, Husserl still employs



all the familiar reflexivity language of modern philosophy, so that it actually reads like a Natorpian explanation, but with some negatives signs thrown in. Thus at best, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is not theoretical in the traditional sense, but the fact remains that he places the whole course of experiential life, even *as a phenomenon*, under "the derivative paradigm of objects correlated with . . . acts of perception."<sup>32</sup>

Yet again, one must be careful here. Heidegger's criticisms are not mere complaints. He does say that Husserl's phenomenology bears the stigma of a Cartesian philosophy of consciousness, that it privileges psychic structure over experiential process, and even that his conception of transcendental selfhood keeps Husserl within the "personalist tradition" instead of pointing beyond it like Dilthey does (GA 20:173–74/125). None of this means, however, that Heidegger thinks that Husserl is doing something impossible, sinful, or mistaken in itself. Rather, he is arguing that Husserl is simply wrong in what he thinks he has accomplished. For my purposes, it is important to note that there are two parts to Heidegger's argument here. First, he argues that contrary to Husserl's own assessment, he has not in fact given a phenomenologically fundamental account of "the how of philosophical experience . . . and its explication of itself" (GA 59:171/131). To be sure, he has "turned himself toward his experiences in an act of [at best, quasi-traditionally interpreted] reflection," and this is indeed "one way of considering things [*Betrachtungsweise*]," but only "*in a specific context*," not in philosophy generally (GA 58:251/189, my emphasis). When Husserl ignores this limitation and describes phenomenological reflection *as such* as a matter of "practicing *epoché*," of "not participating" in the experiencing of whatever is investigated, and of "taking no position" with regards to it, he threatens to "convert phenomenology [i.e., the supposed "original science of life"] into its opposite [i.e., a circumscribed and over-extended take *on* life]." Husserl seems not to understand that it is only when we restrict our vision and resolve to "look at all experiences as *completely intentional from the outset*," and thus "still start out from *thing-apprehending experiences* (e.g., perceptions)," is it *phenomenologically* appropriate to "go along with" experience in this familiar and basically still traditional way.<sup>33</sup> Thus as it stands, Husserl has elevated "a" way of considering things into "the" way of considering things, and if Dilthey's struggle to separate *Verstehen* from *Erklären* has taught us anything, it is that the living-through of life is only sometimes a "thing-apprehending" experience.

Nevertheless Heidegger, ever the destructive *retriever*, insists that we should respond "positively" to Husserl, by recognizing that his phenomenological practice often trumps what he says about it.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the second part of his argument is the more important one. We must see, says Heidegger, that insofar as Husserl pioneers a genuinely new philosophical "possibility for thinking," the very suggestion that phenomenology must take up a standpoint of any kind, transcendental or whatever, is nothing short of "a sin against its ownmost spirit" (GA 56/57:110). Indeed, here is the reason



“the problem of method” is more central to phenomenology than any other form of inquiry. For it must establish, against the grain of the entire modern Western tradition, that it does not even have a method in the usual sense—that in fact, the “decisive direction of its basic bearing” is precisely “not to construct a method from the outside or from above, [and] not to contrive a new theoretical path.” The problem of method for phenomenology, then, has two parts. First, a truly *phenomenological* disclosure of the sphere of lived experience depends, not on consciously developing some sort of special distancing procedure, but on cultivating an “absolute *sympathy with life* that is identical with living through it.” Yet second, one must recognize that this is something we can only accomplish by gradually freeing ourselves from our initially more theoretical attitude until we come to actually “live in” and “intensify” this sympathetic bearing.<sup>35</sup> The idea that bracketing involves “not participating” must therefore be understood as capturing only phenomenology’s “negative side,” namely, its effort to respond to life without the traditional epistemic blinders. Phenomenology’s positive challenge is for it “to join [*mitmachen*] personal life-experience with the greatest vitality and interiority” (GA 58:254/192).

Here is the real promise of Husserl’s insistence on rigor or strictness. Taking up phenomenology’s positive challenge will have to be done in a philosophical atmosphere that already admonishes us to move in the opposite direction—that is, *away from* the “merely subjective” and from the naïveté of pre-theoretical experience—so that we can properly come to know it. Hence, phenomenological *Mitmachen* will necessarily have to be a kind decisive *re-joining*, because its task will be experienced against the inherited background of a tradition that already tells us that precisely this rejoining can only be a relapse into the unscientific and irrational. Against this established tendency, there can be no logical argument. To whom could it be convincingly addressed? Moreover, the real problem is the influence this tendency is having on the attitude of aspiring phenomenologists, never mind their opponents. Hence, in the end, the only adequate counterthrust to the weight of this traditional influence is actual phenomenological practice, grown mindful of how it is really done. Phenomenology, says Heidegger, can “prove itself only through itself” without the aid of any pre-established system of concepts (GA 56/57:110; cf. GA 61:39–40/31; GA 63:46/37).

With this last phrase—that phenomenology must “prove itself from itself”—Heidegger identifies the basic problem he sees with Husserlian phenomenology. It is not just its lingering Cartesianism; it is its “basic tendency,” expressed in all of Husserl’s self-presentations, to assume that philosophizing about life means recognizing some kind of reflective separation from it. Like Natorp, Husserl—at least in what he *says* about phenomenological practice—seems committed to the idea that every philosophy must make a fundamental distinction between living life and thinking about it, and then must somehow place phenomenology more on the side of the



latter.<sup>36</sup> Yet Heidegger does not just reject this idea. He argues that Husserl's own "principle of all principles" is betrayed by it. What the principle says is that "everything originally . . . offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being." If we interpret this principle through Husserl's self-presentations, the conclusion must be that all "accepting" happens in terms of some version of the traditional paradigm of acts and objects. In that case, every phenomenon would have to be understood as actually "offered" to us only to the extent that it is conceived as something to think "about," where all thinking is understood as theoretical reflection by a mind that already interprets every phenomenon as some sort of object in some sort of intentional relation with an active consciousness, even if this initially does not appear to be so. Yet Husserl's very statement of his principle suggests a better option:

If by a principle one were to understand [here] a theoretical proposition, this designation would not be fitting. However, that Husserl speaks of a *principle of principles*, of *something that precedes all principles*, in regard to which no theory can lead us astray, already shows (although Husserl does not explicitly say so) that it does not have a theoretical character. (GA 56/57:109, emphasis altered)

Of course, one could have a deconstructive field day here, reveling in the paradoxical idea of a principle that is not a principle, being "represented" in Husserl's writings in presumably well-formed propositions as if it were both at once, and so on. Or, alternatively and more productively, we can ask instead what Husserl must already understand about the living-through of life in order to be able to claim that "it" cannot be *theoretically* given. What about this "it," this "pre-theoretical primal something [*vorthoretische Ur-etwas*]" that (in the very claim about its *elusiveness* to all theorizing) makes itself known to us here?<sup>37</sup> The implication is that, even if phenomenology is characterized as an "approach," this does not mean that it "involves an unavoidable objectification, an absolutely irremovable moment of theoretization" (GA 56/57:112). What sort of approach is this, that does not devivify life? Clearly, it is Dilthey's conception of understanding life in its own terms that Heidegger has in mind when he asks these questions, and it is in developing such an approach that Heidegger is able to convert the so-called problem of history into a hermeneutical account of the historical determinateness of human existence.

As I will argue in the next three sections, two features of Dilthey's writings are especially important here: First, even in their most narrowly focused and traditionally epistemic passages, *Verstehen* is never depicted simply as a kind of method, set over against *Erklären*. Second, human-historical life is treated primarily as our "surroundings," not as if it were a scientific object or topic, analogous to nature. Taken together, the idea of *Verstehen* as more than a method and the idea that human-historical life is



no mere analog to Nature, foreshadow (and are recognized by Heidegger to foreshadow) his own early conception of a “hermeneutics of facticity” as the successor to the Husserlian idea of a phenomenological *Urwissenschaft*. From *Verstehen* comes Heidegger’s notion of a phenomenological awareness that is not “reflective” in the traditional sense, and from Dilthey’s research regarding human-historical life comes his notion of Dasein’s historicity.

## RETRIEVING DILTHEY’S *VERSTEHEN*: MINDFUL AWARENESS OF LIFE

According to Dilthey, as we have seen, the sheer having of life and our experience of becoming aware of it are not conceptual mysteries but fully “understandable” phenomena, and not just to trained scientists but to all of us, as part of our lived experience. That this is Dilthey’s view has always been widely recognized. What has not been sufficiently considered are the implications this has for the idea of *Verstehen*. At the very least, it means *Verstehen* cannot be regarded as some sort of alternative quasi-perceptual means for approaching life from the outside (e.g., empathy or subjective inference). What Dilthey actually says is that it is a somewhat formalized version of our immediate awareness (*Besinnung*) of lived experience, which he describes as a kind of conscious-coming-to-grips-with-life that each of us enacts in daily affairs. As such, Dilthey’s idea clearly anticipates Heidegger’s famous revisionary proposal, namely, that *understanding is not just what we sometimes do; it is how we always are* (and only sometimes formalize for the sake of scientific research). Natorp complains that all of Dilthey’s talk about *Besinnung* as “immediate” and “inward” shows a lack of proper appreciation for the fact that without the study of life’s objectifications, the human sciences could not understand their meaning. Of course in a certain sense it is true that we come at human scientific research from the outside, notes Heidegger, but this is not important in the way Natorp thinks. The question is not whether the human sciences study life’s expressions but what “motivates” their theoretical constructions and reconstructions. A Natorpian account of life’s expressions remains “merely formal,” in the sense that it theoretically conceptualizes “primordial life” as if it were otherwise unreachable. In Dilthey, however, human scientific reconstruction is better called “constitution” because the sense of what is being conceptualized derives from a self-conscious recognition that we can only “understand” that which “in life and from out of life utters itself.”<sup>38</sup> Although lived experience is certainly externalized, understanding this in any given case involves attempting to imaginatively “re-live” at least something of the experienced, situational sense that comes to expression in its externalizations.<sup>39</sup> Chapter 5 discussed *Verstehen* as a procedure; here I turn to Dilthey’s account of how we become aware that there can be such a procedure, and what Heidegger makes of this.



As we have seen, Dilthey is well aware that his interpretation of human science lies between the Scylla of positivism and the Charybdis of mere opposition to positivism. It is true, he says, that Comte and the positivists as well as John Stuart Mill “truncate and mutilate” lived historical reality in order to turn it into the proper object for a naturalistically conceived human science, but the current critiques of their reductivism are equally unsatisfactory. Too often, they are merely defensive compromises—as when Windelband and Rickert settle for a thoroughly problematic and merely methodological differentiation between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* in terms of their alleged “logical structures”—or else they tend to be metaphysical.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Dilthey asserts, most of today’s objections to positivism are basically reactionary, and therefore equally external to experienced life as positivism itself. Furthermore, echoing Comte’s critique of metaphysicians, Dilthey argues that they also needlessly

sacrifice the legitimate independence of the particular sciences, the fruitful power of their empirical methods, and the certainty of their foundation to a subjective and sentimental mood that nostalgically tries to recall by [allegedly] scientific means a mental satisfaction [provided by long-held speculative theories] that has been lost forever. (GS 1:xvii/49–50)

Nietzsche and Heidegger actually agree with this. It is beyond dispute that “everything” is open to objective explanation. The question for Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger is whether every lived-through phenomenon comes into its own *as explained*. The issue is not *whether* one can make some particular methodological beginning (e.g., an “explanatory” one). The prior and neglected question is *how* we make this beginning, and what is settled at the same time regarding its alternatives. For my part, says Dilthey,

[o]nly in inner experience, in facts of consciousness, have I found a firm anchor for my thinking [about these matters]. . . . All science is experiential; but all experience must be *related back to and derives its validity from the conditions and context of consciousness* in which it arises, i.e., the totality of our nature. . . . Only in the facts of consciousness [as] given in immediate experience do we possess reality as it is.<sup>41</sup>

This early statement in the 1883 *Einleitung* and countless others like it scattered throughout Dilthey’s works figure crucially in Heidegger’s effort to contrast Husserl’s conception of philosophy’s relationship to immediate experience with his own.

Especially instructive is Heidegger’s generous interpretation of Dilthey’s “descriptive and analytical” psychology, the 1894 *Ideas*, where Dilthey considers at length the “conditions and context of consciousness” to which



philosophers of science should “relate [themselves] back.” From this (admittedly flawed) account, says Heidegger, we can draw two lessons. First, Dilthey shows that “‘life’ in its historical context . . . is to be understood as the *way* in which the human being *is*, as possible *object* of the human sciences [to be sure, but] *above all* as the *root* of these sciences.”<sup>42</sup> Second, we can see how this “root” is something to which we can always return precisely because we *already understand it to be* that “from out of which” life expresses itself in many ways.<sup>43</sup> In SZ, these features of Dilthey’s *Ideas* are said to make it the pioneering effort to “understand of ‘life’ philosophically and to hermeneutically ground this understanding in terms of ‘life itself.’” The *Ideas* thus points directly toward Heidegger’s own hermeneutical phenomenology, which illuminates “the way this understanding enlightens itself . . . [and] also the methodology of historical-human science, *but only in a derivative form*.”<sup>44</sup>

Above all, says Heidegger, my notion of “hermeneutics as [ontological] self-elucidation” follows out the *Ideas*’ “tendency to bring the reality of the historical into view and to make clear from this the manner and possibility of its interpretation” (GA 20:19/17). That Heidegger calls this tendency “decisive” is not a rhetorical flourish. He means that Dilthey brings something fresh into view, *against* elements in his own thinking that discourage its proper consideration. Hence, his clarification of how to interpret historical life remains a tendency only, for in spite of his admirable refusal to define his psychology as either a higher “logicized” form of natural-scientific psychology (e.g., Natorp) or an anti-naturalistic alternative (e.g., Husserl), in Dilthey’s basic conception of what he was doing, he “continued to operate in the interrogative ambiance of his contemporaries.”<sup>45</sup> What Dilthey could never do—and what thus prompts Heidegger’s call for the radicalization of the *Ideas*’ basic tendency—is analyze the standpoint of life itself precisely *as* the originary source for philosophical inquiry. Hence, by 1916 Heidegger is trying to turn Dilthey’s “epistemological insights regarding a theory of historical cognition” into what eventually becomes SZ’s analysis of temporal-historical Dasein.<sup>46</sup> To him it is already apparent that in contrast to Natorp’s reconstructions and Husserl’s bracketings and reductions, Dilthey’s idea of understanding life in its own terms holds the most philosophical promise.

“In its own terms” is not just a slogan. For Heidegger, it says quite literally what Dilthey convincingly shows is possible in spite of the dominant tradition’s denials, namely, that “in factual life in its typically improminent (*unabgehoben*) condition . . . [we] can live *unreflectively yet still mindfully* (*besinnlich*) and so stay thoughtfully aware of the full web of possible motivations” prior to any theoretical development of these motivations (GA 58:111/87–88, my emphasis). In 1920, Heidegger calls this mindfulness a taking notice of (*kenntnisnahme*) and “going along with” experience, and he characterizes it as a “*modification* of factual life experiencing,” not a step back from it.<sup>47</sup> Rather than assuming a posture prepared in advance



with assumptions about what experience must be like and how it should be approached, mindfulness “maintains itself in the style of factual experiencing” itself (GA 58:112/88). It thus amounts to a kind of “articulation that is not yet really an articulation, as long as it remains in this basic style” without moving on decisively in a definitely motivated direction (GA 58:115/90). Heidegger argues that thanks to Dilthey’s efforts to avoid the reflection-language of the philosophies of consciousness, we have before us a distinctively non-traditional (and much more phenomenological) account of how this basic mindfulness of “life understanding life” already functions experientially in various degrees of enhancement and intensification (*Steigerung*) before it turns into anything theoretical (GA 58:110–20/87–94, 161/123–24).

Ultimately, then, the best reason for accepting the possibility of such pre-theoretical mindfulness is the fact that it is everywhere already operative in ordinary life. Indeed, the very prevalence of this mindfulness helps prevent its recognition.<sup>48</sup> By keeping to its basic style of “going along with life,” philosophy can learn to respond to life in such a way that “factically experienced contexts of meaningfulness will indeed be . . . noticed and narrated, but still left in their vital facticity.”<sup>49</sup> A genuinely phenomenological philosophy would thus stay free from any specific methodological constraints, and also refuse to define itself in accordance with the standard division of specializations (e.g., logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics). Instead it would attempt to focus on “how I am in situations” no matter what context of meaningfulness gets identified for explication.<sup>50</sup> “The bewildering ambiguity of the word ‘life’ and its many usages is no reason to just dismiss it,” he says. The ambiguity is rooted in the experience of life itself and simply indicates its many possible motivations and possibilities.<sup>51</sup>

Or at least this is how phenomenological philosophy *would* always proceed, if it did not have to develop in a philosophical atmosphere that denies its “mindful” possibility.<sup>52</sup> Heidegger’s concern for this atmospheric problem is reflected in his many references to phenomenology’s need to “work back toward” immediate experience and “free itself gradually from the theoretical.” In the earliest lecture courses, the problem is associated primarily with the hegemony of Cartesian philosophies of consciousness, but slowly Heidegger begins to identify it more with the “troubling tendency of falling” in the living-through life itself.<sup>53</sup> I return to this point in the next section and again in Chapter 8. For now, I simply note that it is Heidegger’s recognition that phenomenology will have to struggle to *become* phenomenological that prompts him to say as early as 1919 that it must be hermeneutical, because it faces opposition not only from other philosophies but from its own inheritance as this already operates in its initial efforts to understand life.<sup>54</sup> Hence, phenomenology must think of its point of departure as involving “a sinking *back* down into (*Versenkung*) life as such”—that is, a *recapturing* of a style of mindfulness that allows its “intuitions” to emerge out of an “empowering experiencing-of-living-experience that takes itself along



as it understands” life’s articulations (GA 56/57:220, 117/188, 99). It is when phenomenology begins this way—that is, as a self-critically mindful “experiencing of experiential being” (GA 58:115 n. 6/216)—that we can see why explicit theoretical articulation of experience is an option, not a necessity. For even

when theorizing, I myself originate in and come out from lived experiencing, *yet something experienceable is brought along from this experiencing*, with which one now does not know what to do, and for which the convenient [modern] title of the irrational has been invented. (GA 56/57:117/99, my emphasis)

Even theoretical constructs, when they are hermeneutically intuited, deserve to be called intensifications of lived experience, in spite of their actually possessing all the features phenomenologists usually complain about. Theoretical objectifications of life do indeed “extinguish the specifically factual context of experience” and devivify factual life, and they do establish cognitively “stabilized” contexts of meaning that are “lifted up out of the unarticulated flow of life” and employed to envision experience as strictly attenuated according to their “particular, methodologically guided totalization-tendencies [*Ganzheitstendenz*]” (GA 58:120–28/94–100). The problem for phenomenology is not theoretical intensification itself; it is theoretical intensification accompanied, on the one hand, by its own refusal to regard any other kind of articulation as philosophically legitimate and, on the other hand, by a willingness on the part of those who don’t accept this refusal to let the intensification stand and turn to another one. The problem is excessive theoretical intensification (*Übersteigerung*) that forgets, *and is allowed to forget*, its own experiential origins and the “bounded limits” of its specific sort of intensification—as, for example, when the clarity and distinctness of mathematical reasoning is so admired that all science and even philosophy itself are squeezed into the space of a “totalizing” ontology of calculative rationality . . . and then met with only the feeble response that something is being left out. Mathematical scientism is rightly seen as a problem, but not an enemy. Sheer opposition only brings the sort of romantic or skeptical anti-scientific backlash expressed in the four objections to philosophy mentioned earlier (GA 58:141/108–9). The real answer to a seriously over-intensified and forgetful viewpoint is recovery and exposure of its roots.

In short, Dilthey’s idea of *Verstehen* deserves to be transformed into the wider and deeper notion of an “immanent illumination of life experience. . . ,” so that we may track both the emergence of any expression of life (including a natural or human science), as well as deflect any unjustified philosophical totalization of an expression (GA 59:171/131). This widening and deepening of Dilthey’s idea of *Verstehen* points the way toward Heidegger’s hermeneutic transformation of Dilthey’s characterizations of life’s standpoint and of human-historical life as well.



## RETRIEVING LIFE'S STANDPOINT: HUMAN EXISTENCE AS "ENVIRONMENTAL"

To hear the echo of Dilthey in the young Heidegger's analysis of everyday life as an "environmental" experience, we need to start by noticing how Dilthey's own writings have the cumulative effect of destabilizing the very idea of a "standpoint" of life. As explained in Chapter 5, Dilthey first conceives this standpoint as just the human-scientific equivalent of the outlook of observation in the natural sciences. Eventually, it takes on the additional importance of being the perspective from which *erklärende* and *verstehende* sciences can be differentiated as types of life-expression. But finally, if this perspective allows us to differentiate the two kinds of sciences, then why not the identification and differentiation of any sort of life expression whatsoever? In this final form, however, the initial conception of this perspective as a standpoint begins to lose its intelligibility. If in its ultimate extension it functions as *the* perspective from a self-aware re-living of the variable forms of the expressivity of life can be accomplished, then what sense does it make to call this "a" standpoint at all? What would be its alternative? For Heidegger, this is ultimately a rhetorical question. In retrospect, the idea that understanding life in its own terms requires a standpoint appears to be an artifact of Dilthey's initial epistemological formulation of his task, reinforced by his opponents' agenda-driven insistence that what he is doing is not really philosophy. The only way to do philosophical justice to Dilthey's idea is to realize that the basic aim of the understanding process is precisely refrain from assuming any standpoint—not by rising above them all, but by remaining "mindfully" within life itself in order to take note and narrate the development of all standpoints.

Furthermore, if Dilthey's restive treatment of *Verstehen* ultimately opens out toward the immanently mindful understanding of life's expressivity in general, then it is not just how philosophy starts but what it starts with that needs to be rethought. The human-historical life painstakingly "gone along with" in so many of Dilthey's pages is primarily an environmental existence, where a surrounding world (*Umwelt*) is already being experienced in thoroughly meaningful ways that raise no skeptical problems about the reality of things and that is already operating quite well without any concepts of substance and accident:

This environmental milieu [*Dieses Umweltliche*] . . . is not a world of entities with a precise meaning-character, objects which are then comprehended as being such and such; rather, the meaningful is [itself] primary and directly available to me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension. Living in an environment, this means to me, everywhere and always, everything is world-like, "it worlds" [*es weltet*], which is something very different from "it values" [*es wertet*]. (The problem of the relation between the two belongs to the eidetic genealogy of primary motivations and leads into difficult problem areas.) (GA 56/57:72–73)



This early, conceptually experimental passage is highly compressed, suggestive, and awkward in several ways. For one thing, the sentence in parenthesis is no throwaway line. What Heidegger means is that “*Es weltet*” and “*Es wertet*” are not ontological equals. The former characterizes our basic environmentally experienced condition; the latter refers to the way a specific kind of meaningfulness can dominate these surroundings when one of life’s “primary motivations” (viz., valuation, literally the determination of what things are worth) prevails. Of course, analyzing any of life’s motivating possibilities, relating them to the basic experiencing of life in which they originate and to other motivational possibilities, determining how they can be expressed, and in the case at hand considering what types of valuation there can be, how these are to be identified and related to each other. . . . Thorny “problem areas” indeed.

However, the main topic of the passage is the ordinary “world-like” situation itself, and a lot of new and neological language is being tried out here. Our environmental milieu is clearly not the scientifically depicted domain of subjects and objects.<sup>55</sup> Quite generally, human-historical life—that is, the whole “region,” or better site or place, where life’s “worlding” happens—is in its fundamental condition is an endlessly rich, diverse, and multiply interested environmental experience (*Umwelterlebnis*):

The intransitive sense of the verb, “to live” always spells itself out . . . in phrases like to live “in” something, live “out” something, live “for” something, live “with” something, live “against” something, live “following” something, live “from” something. This “something” whose many relations to “living” are indicated in this seemingly casual assemblage of prepositional expressions is what we call “world.”<sup>56</sup>

About this meaningful site of life relations (where we find Dilthey’s “*Zusammenhang des Lebens*” in evidence everywhere), Husserl is partially right. It is not something simply given to us; it has to be won (GA 58:29/24). But of course in Heidegger’s interpretation, Husserl is also part of the problem. In the end, life *as lived* eludes him. The environmental milieu of worlding that Heidegger urges phenomenology to sink back into is not the “merely cultural” site of potential worldviews and naïve beliefs in external reality.

Nevertheless, in turning to Dilthey’s more insightful accounts of environmental life, Heidegger calls for a retrieval rather than a simple embrace, because traditional philosophy’s forgetfulness concerning what it “takes with it from life” must remain as much in sight as the environmental life it forgets.<sup>57</sup> Only then can we stop putting the experienced relation of theory and life backward, so that instead of starting with something like the conceptual ideal of clarity and distinctness and denigrating pre-theoretical experience as not living up to it, we recapture environmental life *through* this denigration. It is true, and tempting, to simply accept the fact that something like Natorp’s reconstructions should be avoided, not improved. For in characteristic modern fashion, given his



absolutization of the logical Natorp is able to see [our ordinary] conception of things only as a rudimentary preliminary stage of the genuine logical positing of objects (in science). If he were to acknowledge an original sphere of lived experience such as the environmental at all, it could only be as a *crude* objectification. (GA 56/57:108)

The conditional mood of Heidegger's grammar reminds us that the main issue is not Natorp's excessive love of logic (to which, he says, Husserl's Leibnizian attraction to a *mathesis universalis* "has an unmistakable affinity"). Nor is the main issue found in the unintended irony of Natorp's claim that his reconstruction captures lived experience "as it was given prior to analysis" (quoted in GA 56/57:107). As we saw earlier, this is not quite what he means anyway. Natorp's dogged determination to engage in *re*-constructing what he claims he can never reach shows that his access to immediately experienced life is obscured but not blocked. And it is here, Heidegger now adds, that the real problem lies. Suppose Natorp *were* to really "acknowledge an original sphere of lived experience such as the environmental." Given his philosophical commitments, it could still only appear to him *in the obscured form of a life of "crude objectifications"* of everything neo-Kantian philosophy can objectify better.

The temptation just to savor this conclusion may be strong but should be avoided. Once again, the point is to retrieve not oppose, and that means "understanding the motivation" of Natorp's position, not dismissing it. There is indeed a danger here that Natorp rightly senses. Reading accounts of life like Dilthey's, we might imagine ourselves becoming phenomenologists by entering a world that objectivists like Natorp have missed.<sup>58</sup> Heidegger frames the point by saying, "Were he to directly *acknowledge* [not just reconstruct at self-imposed arm's length] an original sphere of lived experience such as the environmental. . . ." This language is meant to convey Heidegger's warning not to think of phenomenology as possessing a radically different and superior "anti-theoretical" stance (think, e.g., of Husserl's attitude in the *Logos* article). The wrong question is, What did Natorp miss? The right question is, What did he cover badly by overextending what can otherwise be well-employed? Here as elsewhere, the objectification of life experience is not a mistake; it is just a poor model for philosophizing.

## RETRIEVING DILTHEY: SINKING BACK DOWN INTO ENVIRONMENTAL LIFE

How, then, does a hermeneutic phenomenology establish its "basic experience" of mindful intensification of environmental life? As always, there is destruction and there is retrieval. On the one hand and destructively speaking, a genuinely phenomenological philosophy cannot be some species of empiricism, rationalism, and transcendental idealism. It is not that these



philosophies are blind to environmental experience, and phenomenology is now poised to go where they have failed to go. The problem is that, ever since Descartes, modern philosophy in all its major forms has tended to (i) interpret “experience” entirely in terms of whatever is the current conception of “observation” in physical science and (ii) on this basis concoct a very unphenomenological picture of lived (= not yet properly “observational”) experience that is read back into pre-philosophical life.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the very tendency to think of *lived* experience as something “immediate”—and even to translate “*Erlebnis*” this way although no such characteristic is implied by the German original—only makes sense against the background of a philosophical bias in favor of an entirely theoretical and representational orientation, according to which anything just given or apparent remains at best only partially intelligible until worked over by reason.

On the other hand and speaking in terms of retrieval, the phenomenological route back to environmental experience cannot be paved with sheer opposition to modern philosophy, which has rightly (if excessively) defended, as Dilthey says, “the legitimate independence of the particular sciences, [and] the fruitful power of their empirical methods. . . .” Here the two sides of Heidegger’s idea that phenomenology must “prove itself through itself” come together. Once hermeneutic phenomenology achieves its “basic attitude,” it can both appreciatively follow along with life-motivated theoretical articulations (so that, e.g., Natorp’s reconstructions are seen as psychologically useful but philosophically inhibiting), but also stay open to the originary situation of immediately experienced life from which any articulation emerges.<sup>60</sup> Because this sort of philosophy is able to “enact an immanent illumination of life experience that remains in this experience and does not step out and turn it into objectivity,” environmental life no longer appears as an unsatisfactory jumble of crude conceptualizations, waiting to be straightened out by the right constructions. It is life itself that possesses the self-sufficiency (*Selbstgenügsamkeit*) to be the endless source of motivations and expressions, among them, those expressions that wind up being advertised as scientific philosophies that have done the best one can do with life when they have “reconstructed” it.<sup>61</sup> In the sometimes strident language of the early lecture courses, phenomenology is called upon “to listen attentively to the motives speaking out of the vitality of life and not hammer away at life from the outside, using the splinters that fall away from it to patiently build a theoretical edifice [*Systembau*]” (GA 58:160/123). Stripped of such backhandedly constructive accounts of it, experiencing in and of this “surrounding world” shows itself to be entirely meaningful and functional without any theoretical help.<sup>62</sup>

The “scandalous” external world problem provides a revealing case study of how not to think of environmental experience. In ordinary life, the question of whether everything might be mere appearance is not just left unanswered; it is never raised. The idea that this world in which we naturally, bodily, socio-culturally live and breathe, where we find we are



always practically and meaningfully already fully engaged—the idea that this world must have its “reality” proven, “does not correspond to any phenomenal finding.” Moreover, the absence of proof does not drive us toward settling for a “mere belief” in this reality. In fact, there is no such *experience* as “believing in a world.” Our surroundings are “just there” in life before any believing comes about, and if believing does become an issue, it is because we are no longer simply living “within” this world but have deliberately assumed the epistemic stance of conscious and cognizing subjects toward it (GA 20:294–95/215; SZ, 205–8). In everyday life, insofar as our surroundings are acknowledged as “a” phenomenon at all, it is simply and richly everywhere, “worlding,” and being experienced as our “wherein.”<sup>63</sup>

Heidegger’s treatment of the external world issue is clearly related to his argument that the phenomenon of environmental life must be recovered not just accepted, which explains the weight he gives to Dilthey’s essay, “The Origin of Our Belief in the Reality of the External World and Its Justification.”<sup>64</sup> In accordance with its title, the essay does try to “justify” an allegedly key belief, but as Heidegger reads it, Dilthey’s actual argument demonstrates the inappropriateness of even making the attempt. The essay begins by acknowledging the problem, then distinguishes strict logical proof from the kind of empirical justification one can expect in this context, and ends by tracing our sense of the world’s reality back to the “resistance to our impulses” that we live through in the course of our daily affairs. Dilthey concludes that the belief in the reality of the external world is neither an intellectual postulate nor a function of any immediate experience of sheer givenness, but is instead an expression of “comparisons” made between oneself and one’s resistant surroundings (GS 5:98–105/16–22).

For Heidegger, however, the implications of this conclusion are far more important than either the conclusion itself or its intended purpose. For even if Dilthey does not formulate his account of resistance in careful phenomenological terms, shows that “he already saw quite early that reality is experienced not only in knowledge and [with cognitive] awareness but in the whole ‘living subject’” (GA 20:302/220). Unfortunately, by correlating his conception of resistance with the idea of *impulse* Dilthey continues to rely on the framework of the old psychology of drives and reflexes and the standard division of psychic life into thinking, willing, and feeling. In the end, this “forces him away from the authentic phenomenon” and partially betrays his pledge to understand this living subject without reducing it to a “bloodless cogito that merely intends and theoretically thinks the world.” Nevertheless, says Heidegger, in couching his solution to the external world problem in terms of the phenomenon of resistance, Dilthey “comes closest to the [solution] I advocate” (293/214). For what his appeal to resistance demonstrates is that the problem should not be solved but “made visible” (GA 56/57:88)—in effect, exposed for what it really is, namely, an issue manufactured by misplaced confidence in treating every experience on the model of perceiving objects. As Dilthey’s argument shows, “resisting” may



well be the way we experience some particular entities in environmental life, but that these entities are part of our lives at all is a function of the worldly way they are already disclosed *within the surroundings* as we “go out toward something” and find that it pushes back. Hence, resistance only emerges as a phenomenon in the first place because we already find ourselves living in a way that presupposes this disclosive (i.e., “worlding”) world (GA 20:304/222; SZ, 210–11). This is why, says Heidegger, when I look to my surroundings for “phenomenal evidence” of a “belief” in the world’s existence, I cannot find any. “Both resistance and bodily presence find their ground in this, that worldliness already is” (GA 20:305/222).

Here is Heidegger’s punch line. In the idea of resistance, we find confirmation of our already being fully engaged in environmental life before anything is specifically “observed” that might be handled by dragging in the philosophical machinery of modern philosophy. The ultimate importance of Dilthey’s essay is that it throws us back toward this environing world in which resistance initially make sense. Granted, there is a

deeply ingrained prejudice in favor of the theoretical [that] constitutes a great hindrance to any genuine survey of environmental experience in spite of its prevalence. Yet this experience is in fact no mere contingency; it is implicated in the very essence of life itself. By contrast, we only become theoretical in exceptional cases. (GA 56/57:88)

Hence, when we actually “enter into the vitality” of environmental experience, the first thing we notice is how “everything” is already disclosed as part of our surroundings. Strictly speaking, neither this disclosure nor the entities disclosed are “given” to us at all, the way insulated objects are. To characterize “something environmental as given is already a theoretical infringement that forces it away from me, from my historical ‘I,’ and then the ‘it worlds’ of environmental experience is no longer primary” (88–89)

It will be nearly a decade before SZ identifies environmentality as the special worldliness of that mode of being-in-the-world with entities close at hand whose primacy is asserted over the more familiar mode of “knowing.” Yet as in SZ, the early lecture courses are already replete with SZ-like descriptions of an environmental life filled with lots of stuff (*Zeug*) to handle, use, store, and treat as handy with little cognizing or even intensified awareness, and as in SZ, this portrayal of ordinary life is only preliminary to what he will say elsewhere about the historical dimensions of this everyday life. Unlike SZ, Heidegger’s numerous early accounts of “how it is” with environmental life are typically unsystematic and sometimes even in apparent conflict. There are, for example, several forerunners to SZ’s conception of worldliness as the “how” of human being-in-the-world. In WS 1919–20, he “runs through life as it gives itself to us immediately” and announces that it manifests three interrelated “worlds”—an environing world (*Umwelt*, in the narrow sense of surroundings), a shared world (*Mitwelt*), and a self-world



(*Selbstwelt*)—which he calls tendencies within life itself (GA 58:43–46/34–37, 59–64/46–50). In WS 1921–22, these worlds are called directions of care—that is, aspects of the lifeworld—which he sometimes says we are “in” and sometimes says we are “related to” (GA 61:94–99/71–73). And by SS 1925, the entire threefold configuration has become simply “the world,” and it is retrospectively clear that its one unified role as horizon of sense, lived atmosphere, or overall “worldly” character of lived experience was always Heidegger’s guiding theme.<sup>65</sup>

Yet if Heidegger’s early treatments of environmental life are unsystematic, they are not “restive”; they constitute deliberately “repeated” efforts to clarify how it is with this life. From 1919 into the early 1920s, a conscious sense of hermeneutic purpose runs through them that SZ will later say had its roots in Dilthey. More than anyone else at the time, Dilthey displays a willingness to rethink what it is to understand life at all, whenever his research comes up against some aspect of life’s expressivity that his current conception of *Verstehen* seems ill-equipped to handle. In other words, Dilthey’s philosophy appears motivated by a fundamental desire to *become phenomenological*. One sees this, for example, in his gradual shift from “psychic” to historical descriptions of experience, and in the strongly environmental instead of “ocular” character of his accounts of human-historical existence. He thus reminds us how inappropriate the standard construction of pre-scientific life as a world of perceived objects and naïve subjects really is. By the early 1920s, when it comes to the question of philosophy’s proper starting point, Heidegger simply starts here.<sup>66</sup> Under current circumstances, he notes, too much of experienced life is being squeezed into a traditional and hegemonic “scientific-theoretical” metaphysics, and too much phenomenological reaction to this reductiveness is itself undercut by its inheritance of this tradition.<sup>67</sup> As a result, we witness the emergence of ever more misbegotten (*Mißgeburten*) conceptions of philosophy (GA 61:39/30)—evidence that both those who wish to stress respect for science and those who promote sensitivity to experiential life have lost their bearings.

From within this uncomfortable inheritance but with Dilthey’s help, Heidegger finds both the “motivation” for hermeneutical phenomenology and the strength, as he says, to take up and “make his own” the two legitimate concerns about philosophy’s definition that are hiding in the claims of the misbegotten. One concern is that philosophy must be principled (i.e., have a clear sense of what it is trying to accomplish), the other, that it remain sufficiently in touch with life to be capable of “concrete work” (i.e., avoid being simply logical, formalistic, and clever).<sup>68</sup> That hermeneutic phenomenology will have a principled approach is the topic of all the discussions about working out its “basic experience” that we discussed above. That it will remain concretely in touch with life is partially assured by the fact that this basic experience involves going along mindfully with lived experience instead of taking a step back from it. However, sustaining this mindfulness also involves employing a suitable mode of expression for its findings. As we



saw in Chapter 5, Heidegger calls this mode of expression formal indication, and here again, Dilthey's notion of "categories of life" sets the precedent.

Categories of life, says Dilthey, are not like Kantian (and thus also Natorpian) concepts. The latter are derived from reason, but categories of life "originate in life itself" and thus constitute "real" and not merely "formal" categories. Formal categories represent the world of lived experience in ways that are certainly intelligible, but they do so in abstract terms and in accordance with precise methods, so there will always be epistemological issues about the number, accuracy, systematic arrangement, universality, and permanence of any specific set of these concepts. Moreover, because formal categorization turns experienced life into some sort of carefully circumscribed "reality" (e.g., Nature or History), it always makes sense to think of this process as expressing itself in terms of systems of a more or less fixed and stable set of concepts. Regarding the categories of life, however, matters are entirely different. Stated quickly, "whenever there is reflexive awareness (*Innewerden*) or self-possession of a fact of consciousness the problem of knowledge does not exist" (GS 14:62/SW 1:249). Because these categories issue directly from that awareness, their employment does not yet raise any issues about representation and systematic coherence; they simply designate features of life as it is lived through pre-theoretically in the "primordial world" of everyday affairs (GS 19:361/SW 1:62). Hence, instead of purchasing a power to generalize by theoretically "fixing what is essentially fluid," they remain responsive to life's ever-changing visage without any expectation of finality or completeness (GS 7:192–95/SW 3:214–16).

In one respect, then, Dilthey can be forgiven for telling us at various points that the primary category of life is selfhood (GS 19:361), or meaningfulness (GS 7:232–34, 361/SW 3:252–53), or temporality (GS 7:192–93/SW 3: 214–15). Since life as lived is not categorically prepackaged, how we mindfully experience living through it will deserve different formally indicative descriptions on different occasions, and this will seem problematic only if these descriptions are then compared as if they were competing conceptual accounts of the single essence of life. For example, de Mul struggles with the supposed "thorny problem" Dilthey generates by sometimes describing lived experiences as always found in coherent unities (*Zusammenhang*) and sometimes saying instead that at any given "moment" it is possible to become aware of such coherences instead of simply living them out. Isn't there a serious "tension," he asks, between on the one hand making life everywhere a matter of experiential coherences and on the other hand, conceiving it as separately noticeable moments? Sympathetic commentators often explain this apparent tension developmentally—pointing, for instance, to Dilthey's early stress on the coherent psychic structure of experience and contrasting it with his later emphasis on experience as a historical process. De Mul goes a step further and argues that Dilthey eventually recognizes this tension and in the later works distinguishes between synchronic and diachronic "structures" of experience to account for the use of different



categories (*Tragedy*, 226–39). Yet the obvious rejoinder to this solution is to ask why Dilthey changes his focus at all and how the two descriptions are related. For Heidegger, this whole line of scholarly reasoning is beside the point. What Dilthey's research actually shows is that from within life itself, there is no "tension" or logical incompatibility between descriptions of the coherence of experiences and descriptions of the possibility of noticing this coherence in the moment. Phenomenologically speaking, they are both features of how it is with life, where sometimes it is more prominently sensed to be a relational unity and sometimes, more a matter of noticing this "now."

Yet commentators do have a legitimate concern here, even if expressing it as a worry about conceptual tensions betrays it. One might fully understand what Dilthey means by categories of life, grant their essentially unsystematic and descriptive character, and even accept the necessity of such categories for research in the human sciences, but still object that none of this explains why such categorization is the proper basis for *philosophy*. This objection will be especially powerful, of course, in an inherited philosophical atmosphere like our own "hermeneutical situation," where the very idea of "pre-theoretical" intelligibility is suspect (except maybe in poetry). In Heideggerian language, how must experiential life "be" for us, such that Dilthey's sort of categorization is as crucial to philosophy as it is to the human sciences?

Dilthey provides no account of this ontological issue, but several of Heidegger's early attempts to work out a "hermeneutics of facticity" explicitly address it. This is perhaps most evident in WS 1921–22, in the same lecture course that begins with several weeks' discussion of how to "define" philosophy. Using "factual existence" as his preferred phrase for "experienced life," he interprets this existence for the first time in terms of caring (*Sorge*). In strongly Dilthey-like tones, he begins by observing that when we consider together the various senses of "life" and "to live" as these describe who we are and what we do,

a characteristic, prevailing sense announces itself: life = existence, "being" in and through life. But typically, this sense "sounds" weak and uninformative and is usually not heard properly . . . [so that] its appropriation and interpretation in philosophy remains mostly fragmentary [Dilthey?] or is settled by means of a conceptual construction [Natorp?]. (GA 61:85/64)

However, he continues, now that we know how to set these fragmentary and constructive accounts aside and hear this prevailing sense (i.e., by "sinking down" into lived experience), its categorization can be "actualized in an interpretation executed in, for, and out of factual life." So interpreted, living itself in its broadest and ubiquitous "relational" character is always some sort of caring, and this caring-relationality can in turn be noticed and interpreted in terms of "the basic categories of life."<sup>69</sup> Heidegger goes on to



identify numerous such categories, but he cautions that he is offering them only as a “rough” characterization of life through which philosophy can at least begin to “take up the question of . . . the *ontological character of life*.” The Being of life as its ‘*facticity*’” (GA 61:114/85, author’s emphasis). Unsurprisingly, “every categorization of life is essentially subject to being repeated” (88/67), since every immanent illumination of experience points us in the direction of still further illumination—not, of course, toward Perfect Vision, but toward “simpler,” more penetrating, “more serious,” and “more difficult” interpretations of how it is with life. (Think, for example, of SZ’s downwardly spiraling analysis, in which we start with nothing more than the preliminary sense of human existence as a matter of being-in-the-midst of things, but eventually arrive at an interpretation of this condition as a matter of concrete temporalizing . . . only then to recognize that we cannot go on further in this direction with the formal indications so far employed. . . .)

The important point for us here is that this rough characterization of life as, let us say, factual existence open to ontological investigation, marks a decisive transformation of Dilthey’s fragmentary and ill-explained employment of “real” categories into a “principled” and formally indicative hermeneutics of facticity. This hermeneutics, he explains, is really not [yet] a philosophy. Traditionally, philosophers have confidently directed themselves toward their well-known problems, treated these problems with some species of well-known tools, and then defended the positions these treatments produce. Hermeneutics, however, moves in the opposite direction. Instead of moving ahead on the familiar paths of modern philosophy, it “looks [instead] to the particular modes of being related to their objects” that modern philosophers of various stripes are enacting as they solve their problems and defend their positions. In this way, hermeneutics demonstrates a primary interest in “what goes on in philosophy before it becomes what it is” (GA 63:51, 59/40, 46). SZ’s analysis of Dasein is, of course, the ultimate expression of this interest.

Here, then, we can sum up Heidegger’s retrieval of Dilthey’s standpoint of life. The *Verstehen* that Dilthey himself already describes as “life understanding life” is transformed from something we do to something we are. Dilthey draws on this who-we-are to fashion the appropriate attitude for the human sciences, but as his own research shows, understanding is really the mark of our basic condition—that is, of how we live though life and find it fully meaningful without doing anything special to make it so. When Heidegger sees that the “mindfulness” that often accompanies our experiencing is a kind of “intensification” of that experiencing, he realizes that a genuinely phenomenological philosophy must “enact” precisely this intensified understanding in order to “be” genuinely responsive to what is disclosed in the sphere of lived experience. At the same time, Heidegger reconceives Dilthey’s descriptions of human-historical life. Although Dilthey emphasizes the pre-theoretical and environmental character life, he remains for the most



part satisfied to make this the key feature of Life regarded as a scientific object. With Heidegger, however, environmentality is shown to be characteristic of factual life itself as we live it, which makes it the basic feature of our way of being and thus the very phenomenon of which a hermeneutics of facticity must be most mindful.

Yet in the process of making this retrieval, Heidegger begins to stress another feature of facticity that receives no special emphasis in Dilthey but turns out to be crucial to any successful effort, not only to retrieve Dilthey but to “further” the ontological promise of his research. As we have seen and as the young Heidegger acknowledges, efforts to found a phenomenological philosophy are everywhere met with misunderstanding and opposition. At first, he views this reception primarily as the function of a hegemonic inheritance, but eventually he comes to think of its ultimate source as a feature of factual life itself. Initially, Heidegger calls this feature ruinance (*Ruinanz*), or lapsing (*Abfallen*), or even a “sliding decline into mundane multiplicity” (after Augustine’s *defluxus in multum*), but by late 1922 this feature has definitively become SZ’s famous existential category, falling (*Verfallen*).<sup>70</sup> In my final chapter, I argue that in just the right way for my purposes, Nietzsche’s struggle to find a genuine path forward in a scientisitic culture illustrates the power of ruinance or falling. I make no claim that Heidegger retrieves this notion from Nietzsche, but I do claim it is obviously in play when he remarks that in UM2, Nietzsche understands more about temporality than he makes known to us.

## NOTES

1. W. V. Quine, “Speaking of Objects,” (*Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 31 [1957–58]: 5–22, 22), cited from *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 1–24, 25.
2. *Ontological Relativity*, vi; and 6 (“There is a notion that our provincial ways of positing objects and conceiving nature may be best appreciated for what they are by standing off and seeing them against a cosmopolitan background of alien cultures; but the notion comes to nothing, for there is no που στω. . . . [Yet] for all the difficulty of transcending our object-directed pattern of thought, we can examine it well enough from inside.”).
3. Indeed, beyond what I have claimed regarding these philosophical matters, says Quine, there is only (B.F. Skinner’s) psychology (“Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1969], 75).
4. As noted in Chapter 1, views like Quine’s about the appropriate stance of a contemporary philosopher (and about much else) are now widely taken to belong more to the neo-positivist past than to analytic philosophy in its current forms. Nevertheless, for my purposes, there is something better learned by starkly juxtaposing Quine’s position with those of Dilthey and Nietzsche than by retracing the revisions and critiques of his position that have lead most analytic philosophers to think of themselves—with widely varying degrees of accuracy!—as post-Quinean. For a sampling of the latter, see Scott Soames, “The Place of Quine in Analytic Philosophy,” in *A Companion to W. V. O.*



Quine, ed. Gilbert Harman and Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 432–64; Murray G. Murphey, *The Development of Quine's Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 227–45; and Joseph Rouse, “Quinean Indeterminacy and Its Implications for Naturalism,” in *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 106–34.

5. Let this one reference to interpretations as “carrying forward” stand for the numerous places where I should acknowledge the help I’ve received from Eugene Gendlin’s wonderfully informal (though in my opinion, also thoroughly hermeneutical in the more technical sense) ways of describing how the creative transformations of experience—whether as destructive retrievals, repetitions, or other workings-out of free relations—happen. I discovered many years after my first enthusiastic reading of his *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, 2nd ed. (1963; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997) that his philosophy MA thesis is on Dilthey. For discussion and references, see my “After Dilthey and Heidegger: Gendlin’s Experiential Hermeneutics,” in *Language Beyond Postmodernism: Saying, Thinking, and Experiencing in Gendlin’s Philosophy*, ed. David M. Levin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 190–226.
6. As Jacob Owensby correctly argues, Dilthey’s critique of Cartesian philosophies of consciousness is motivated primarily by the desire to reform the conception of consciousness for the sake of the human sciences, whereas Nietzsche’s critique of such philosophies amounts to a rejection of them as a philosophical starting point at all (*Dilthey and the Narrative of History* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994], 57–58). What he does not see, however, is that the difference between them is really not a disagreement over what to make of the traditional notion of consciousness. It appears this way because their initial philosophical self-conceptions do not adequately reflect the pre-theoretical and experiential concerns that motivate their inquiries. Makkreel’s discussion of the disagreement between Dilthey and Nietzsche on art suffers from the same limitation. He correctly describes their disagreement, but never discuss the fact that Dilthey wishes to understand art and Nietzsche, the possibility of creating it (*Dilthey*, 158–59).
7. SZ, 398, my emphasis, translation slightly altered. I render “*Unruhe*” as “restiveness” instead of “restlessness,” because the former more strongly carries the implication of “resistance to something that constrains”—in this case the constraint of residual epistemological loyalties. That this restiveness is present from the very start is now an easier case to make, thanks to the recent publication of early drafts of Dilthey’s unfinished *Einleitung* (GS 19:58ff; SW 1:245ff). See Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 441–46; and (without benefit of these drafts) my “Non-Analytical, Unspeculative Philosophy of History: The Legacy of Wilhelm Dilthey,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 3, no. 3 (1976): 311–16.
8. SZ, 46. Cf. GA 20:164/118–19. It is widely assumed that Gadamer and Heidegger agree about how to go on from Dilthey, and that both of them see this as a matter of ontologizing his epistemic conception of hermeneutics by reconceiving *Verstehen* as our existential condition and *Auslegung* as its enactment. But a careful comparison of Heidegger’s early lecture courses, his 1925 Kassel lectures on Dilthey, and SZ’s remarks on Dilthey’s being “on the way toward the question of life” with Gadamer’s analysis Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger in *Truth and Method* suggests otherwise. According to Gadamer, Dilthey never really gets past his unsuccessful attempt to “make the human sciences the equals of the natural sciences,” and it is Husserl who “made it an absolutely universal working method to go back to life and hence . . . abandon



for good the narrow approach of simply inquiring into the methods of the human sciences.” Yet even for Husserl, says Gadamer, *Verstehen* “remained a last *methodological* ideal of philosophy in contrast to the naiveté of unreflecting life”; hence Heidegger had to “make a completely fresh beginning” in order to turn *Verstehen* into “the original form of the realization of Dasein” (*Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 2004], 249–50). In fact, however, Heidegger thinks it is Dilthey not Husserl, who comes the farthest in the direction of SZ. As I argue below, Husserl’s more systematic, method-focused, “consciousness”-oriented phenomenology seems much less promising than Dilthey’s hermeneutics of historical life. Moreover, Heidegger does not make “fresh beginnings”—which are in any case impossible—but rather destructive retrievals and other sorts of “repetitions” that transform rather than imagine leaving behind what has already been said and done.

9. SZ, 377, 397, 403–404; cf. GA 64:6/3. Heidegger’s language here echoes that of his early lecture courses, now recontextualized as part of SZ’s Daseinsanalysis. Cf. the Dilthey Draft, GA 64:3–6, 14–15/1–3, 10. In fact, GA 64:6–14/3–10 were moved verbatim to SZ, §77, 399–403. See GHBT, 321–23; and generally, Kisiel, “Why the First Draft of *Being and Time* Was Never Published,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 20 (1989): 3–22.
10. See, e.g., Magda King, who argues that to say that SZ’s division II, chapter V, is “solely concerned with furthering the pioneering investigations of Dilthey in a preparatory way . . . [is] . . . as exaggerated as it is misleading” (*A Guide to Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time’*, ed. John Llewelyn [Albany: SUNY Press, 2001], 299, author’s emphasis). This objection is weak in several respects, and in King’s case, also misstated. Heidegger does not say that the analysis of historicity furthers Dilthey’s research in a “preparatory” way. He says that insofar as the whole of SZ is an existential-temporal Daseinsanalysis that “prepares” us to raise the Being-question again, it is “resolved [*entschlossen*] to foster” Dilthey’s investigations (SZ, 404). Moreover, since *Entschlossenheit* is Heidegger’s technical term for how authentic Dasein “resolutely” takes up what is handed down to it, his choice of verbs here is not insignificant. Finally, King ignores the fact that Heidegger had for at least a decade already been pushing the idea that to think through Dilthey’s question of life is precisely to see the need for a Daseinsanalysis. By stressing the explicit topic of §§73–77—i.e., the relation between historiology, being “in” history, and Dasein’s historicity—King downplays the fact that the whole chapter is really a cumulative and “more primordial” *repetition* of the Daseinsanalysis up to this point (SZ, 372).
11. See van Buren’s discussion of Heidegger’s subsequent highly ambiguous and often negative attitude toward his early Freiburg lecture courses (*Rumor*, 5–19). On the unfortunate use made of these often quite “unhermeneutical” efforts to create an official self-portrait, both by Heidegger’s more orthodox followers and especially by the creators of the disastrous “Ausgabe letzter Hand” policy for the GA after Heidegger’s death, see *Rumor*, 19–26, and also Kisiel, “Edition und Übersetzung: Unterwegs von Tatsachen zu Gedanken, von Werken zu Wegen,” in *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers*, ed. Dietrich Papenfuss and Otto Pöggeler (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992), 89–107.
12. See, e.g., GA 59:173–74/132–33. All of these early notions are forerunners of SZ’s consideration of anxiety and “care” (GHBT, 136–37, 159–61, 198–99, and esp. 493). The terms themselves have a still earlier source in Heidegger’s life, viz., in his experience of religious crisis in 1917. See, in



- addition to GHBT, 71–75; S.J. McGrath and Andrzej Wiercinski, eds., *A Companion to Heidegger's 'Phenomenology of Religious Life'* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010); Thomas Sheehan, "Reading a Life: Heidegger and Hard Times," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 70–83; and van Buren, *Rumor*, 307–13.
13. Numerous topics are being ignored here—about self-consciousness, self-knowledge, reflexivity vs. introspection, to name just a few. I focus only on how Heidegger retrieves Dilthey's concept of understanding life in its own terms. For this, discussion of Natorp is necessary, since it is Natorp with whom Heidegger contrasts his own view. For background to the Heidegger-Natorp controversy, see Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 73–98; for general background of the tradition they share, see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Reflexion und Diskurs: Fragen einer Logik der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977); and Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), ch. 5, "Post-Hegelian Criticism of Reflexivity," 60–78.
  14. Makkreel and Rodi explain that their choice of "reflexive awareness" conveys something of the spontaneous, turning-back-upon-itself character of experience which "happens" without any deliberate movement of self-consciousness and rational reflection (SW 1:26–27). In KNS 1919, Heidegger tries "*Erleben des Erlebens*" (GA 56/57:117 ["experiencing of experiencing," 99]). There is also a clear connection here between Lask's distinction between constitutive and "reflexive" categories and Heidegger's development of the method of formal indication (GHBT, 35–38; and Kisiel, "Why Students of Heidegger Will Have to Read Emil Lask," in *Heidegger's Way of Thought: Critical and Interpretive Signposts* [New York: Continuum, 2002], 106–14. For discussion *Innewerden*, see Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 147–48, 283–84, and 429–31.
  15. There is implicit criticism of Husserl in this praise, since at the time Husserl had not provided a defense of his notions of givenness and its phenomenological intuition. See, e.g., Sophie-Jan Arrien, "Natorp et Heidegger: une science originaire est-elle possible?" in *Heidegger en dialogue 1912–1930: Rencontres, affinités et confrontations*, eds. Servanne Jollivet and Claude Romano (Paris: J. Vrin, 2009), 111–29.
  16. Quoted in Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 75. Zahavi traces the continuing conversation about phenomenological "reflection" set in motion by the controversies among the original key players (i.e., Natorp, Husserl, Heidegger, and Dilthey). Unconvinced by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann's argument that Heidegger offers a genuine, "non-reflective" alternative to traditional reflection (*Hermeneutik und Reflexion. Der Begriff der Phänomenologie bei Heidegger und Husserl* [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000], 20–27, 92), Zahavi concludes that although it is an overstatement to claim that Heidegger's hermeneutical intuition of immediately experienced life is "unreflective," it does seem right to call it a kind of *reflection* that involves "nonobjectifying hermeneutical thematization and articulation" (96, my emphasis). See also, n. 17. For critical analysis of Natorp and Husserl, see Sebastian Luft, "Reconstruction and Reduction: Natorp and Husserl on Method and the Question of Subjectivity," in *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Sebastian Luft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 51–91.



17. GA 56/57:107–108; also GA 59, §14:112–128/87–99. Zahavi says, misleadingly and seemingly against his own remarks elsewhere (96), that Heidegger “basically agrees” with Natorp about the nature of reflection and thus turns instead to work out a phenomenology that is not “reflective” (*Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 76–78). This wrongly suggests that Heidegger is willing to privilege the traditional modern interpretation of reflection itself that Natorp presupposes. There are just too many places in the early lecture courses where Heidegger experiments with descriptions of self-awareness, taking-notice, sympathizing with life, etc., to lump them all together as extra-Natorpian, “nonreflective” alternatives. Moreover, it is never Heidegger’s strategy to leave hegemonic ways of thinking things in place and simply set alternatives beside them. As he learned from Dilthey, this strategy results in uncritical acceptance of something that already takes up too much room, and it guarantees second class status for what may well deserve more. Zahavi’s exposition ends much like Dilthey’s initial defense of a second science. After comparing the positions of Natorp, Husserl, and Heidegger (and more briefly, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty), he resorts to a sort of quasi-modern notion of reflection to assess his results, asserting that Heidegger succeeds only in showing that there is a kind of reflection that “avoids Natorp’s objections,” but not that there is a full-blown “nonreflective” alternative (96–98).
18. See Luft, “Reconstruction and Reduction,” 64–66; and Kisiel, GHBT, 131–33.
19. GA 58:113/89, my emphasis. Thus we see that although logical certainty is a quality of valid claims and sound arguments, taking-notice of life in its lived-through thereness has an experiential certainty (*Erfahrungsgewißheit*) of its own. The problem with Natorp is that he is committed to denying philosophical status to his *own* “taking-notice.”
20. GA 56/57:107–109; GA 59:114/89. Heidegger’s citations are to the 1912 edition, *Allgemeine Psychologie nach kritische Methode, Bd. I: Objekt und Methode der Psychologie* (Tübingen: Paul Siebeck).
21. Heidegger reaffirms this distinction decades later in the “My Way to Phenomenology [1963]” (GA 14:101/82), and in a 1969 addendum (GA 14:102), directs attention to SZ 38, where he says his preliminary conception of phenomenology does not derive from the “actuality” of phenomenology as a philosophical movement (his marginal note adds, “i.e., not in the transcendental-philosophical direction of Kantian critical idealism”), but rather aspires to something higher, viz., its untapped possibility (SZ, 62–63; GA 2:51/S, 36). The full story of Husserl vs. Heidegger as “phenomenological” philosophers remains to be written. For a fair summary of Heidegger’s pre-SZ conception of phenomenology from a Husserlian perspective, see J.N. Mohanty, *Husserl’s Freiburg Years, 1916–1938* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 450–62.
22. Husserl may already be interpreting even Hegel’s system as a *Weltanschauung*, which he does explicitly in later writings (Mohanty, *Husserl’s Freiburg Years*, 447). The Nietzschean echo in Husserl’s description of what a world-view does is striking, if also unknowing. “Of course, we need history, too. Not, it is true, as the historian does, in order to lose ourselves in the developmental relations in which the great philosophies have grown up, but in order to let the philosophies themselves, in accord with their spiritual content, work on us as an inspiration” (PRS, 195–96).
23. On the envelope containing his WS 1902–3 lecture notes, Husserl wrote, “From time to time I am born up by the conviction that I have made more progress in the critique of knowledge than any of my predecessors, that I have seen with substantial and, in some respects, complete clarity what



my predecessors scarcely suspected or else left in a state of confusion. And yet: what a mass of unclarity in these pages, how much half-done work, how much anguishing uncertainty in the details. How much is still just preliminary work, mere struggle on the way to the goal and not the full goal itself. . . . Is this half clarity, this tenuous restlessness, which is a sign of unresolved problems, bearable? Thus I am, after many years, still the beginner and the student. But I want to become the master! *Carpe diem*” (cited in the translator’s introduction, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. Lee Hardy [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999], 1).

24. See Sandmeyer, *Husserl’s Constitutive Phenomenology*, 187–188 n. 5. Is it really the case that the *Logos* article is too much a period piece to give us a substantive picture of Husserlian phenomenology in its full promise? After all, its conception of phenomenology is not a quick-and-dirty image produced for the occasion; it “emerges from and against the background of ten years’ philosophical labor” (GA 20:128/93). Moreover, as Heidegger remarks in various places, philosophers often reveal the most about what they basically understand when they are in the midst of opposing something.
25. In spring, 1929, Heidegger does say *en passant* that “philosophizing happens as the most originary attitudinal bearing [*Haltung*] possible”; hence, if one must call this bearing a worldview, “it is no worldview as one attitude [*Haltung*] among others; rather it is the basic bearing par excellence” (GA 27:396, 397). See Daniel O. Dahlstrom, ed., *The Heidegger Dictionary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 160. Heidegger’s most famous critique of philosophy as worldview-theory is, of course, “The Age of the World-Picture” (GA 5:75–113/57–85; cf. GA 24:4–17/4–15). However, in 1938 when this piece was written, Heidegger is more concerned with analyzing worldview-theory’s place in the modern history of metaphysics, its role in the philosophical conceptualization of modern science and scientized technology, and the need to be meditatively thoughtful (*besinnlich*) about the results of this eventuation on our experience in a way that does not depict this mindful activity as either worldview-theory, *Urwissenschaft*, or even “philosophy.” These later concerns are obviously connected to the prior question of how to “be” thoughtful. Hence, it is not accidental that the essay starts by considering what sort of *Besinnung* (unfortunately translated “reflection”) the age requires (GA 5:75, 96–97/57, 73).
26. In WS 1919–20, Heidegger explains that an “original science of life” is really not “a science in the proper sense [*eigentlichen Sinn*] all” (GA 58:230/174). Four years later, he says instead that the very phrase, “philosophy of life” is as “comical and senseless” as the “botany of plants” (GA 18:242/162, and SZ, 46). For discussion, some of which I draw on below, see Angel Xolocotzi, “Rigor and Originality: The Transformation of the Scientific Character of Husserl’s Phenomenology in Martin Heidegger’s Early Lectures,” in *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: Hermeneutic Press, 2005), 274–89. See also Scott M. Campbell, *The Early Heidegger’s Philosophy of Life : Facticity, Being, and Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 64–67, which I unfortunately found too late to use systematically.
27. “I am concerned,” writes Heidegger to Karl Löwith in 1921, “not with a primary and isolated definition of philosophy—but rather only with the kind of definition that is related to the existentiell interpretation of facticity” (August 19, 1921, in BH, 99). “*Existenzziel*” does not yet have the technical sense it later gains when Heidegger pairs it with the neologism, “*existenzial*,” where the latter has a strictly ontological meaning (BH, 432; Kisiel, GHBT, 496).



28. PRS, 195. In the end, Husserl refused the invitation. In 1931, he wrote Alexander Pfänder that he had “arrived at the distressing conclusion that philosophically I have nothing to do with this Heideggerian profundity, with this brilliant unscientific genius; that Heidegger’s criticism [of my phenomenology] . . . is based upon a gross misunderstanding; [and] that he may be involved in the formation of the kind of philosophical system which I have always considered my life’s work to make forever impossible” (*Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927–1931)*, trans. Thomas Sheehan and Richard E. Palmer [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997], 482).
29. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, first book, *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Fred Kersten (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 44, author’s emphasis.
30. In the early lecture courses, Heidegger’s criticisms stress the unreflective character of Husserl’s accounts of phenomenological practice, but by 1925, his focus has shifted away from Husserl’s neglect of this “pre-scientific” issue and toward the clearly more fundamental question, viz., “Does [Husserl’s] elaboration of the thematic field of phenomenology, the field of intentionality, raise the question of the *being of this region*, of the *being of consciousness*? . . . Does [he] anywhere really arrive at the methodological ground that enables us to raise this *question of the sense of being*, which must precede any phenomenological deliberation and is implicit in it?” (GA 20:140–48/102–108). Heidegger’s answer to these questions, of course, is basically no.
31. Quoted from Natorp’s *Allgemeine Psychologie*, GA 56/57:100–101. Shall we call this an indirect confirmation of Nietzsche’s claim that knowledge is murder, but one expressed with approval rather than dismay?
32. Kisiel, GHBT, 322–26, cited on 331; and “A Philosophical Postscript: On the Genesis of ‘*Sein und Zeit*,’” *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 8 (1992–93): 226–32. Cf. GA 63:70–74/55–58; and GA 59:171–73/123–25. Thus, to anyone who takes either a reconstructive or Husserlian-transcendental approach to the whole unified complexity of experienced life, the question of phenomenological philosophy’s “enactment” (*Vollzug*) of lived experience remains “utterly foreign” (GA 59:149/115).
33. GA 58:254/191–92, emphasis modified. See also, GA 58:223–31/168–73, 248–256/187–92 (from Oskar Becker’s transcript). Also GA 56/57:84–94. As we will see momentarily, with Dilthey’s help Heidegger shifts the focus from world-as-perceived to world as everyday surroundings (*Umwelt*), with the consequence that the former is shown to be a theoretically modified version of the latter. The anticipation, in GA 56/57 and GA 58, of SZ’s discussion of *Umwelt* is striking.
34. For Heidegger, the tension between traditional self-description and pioneering phenomenological research “in the particular” is chronic in Husserl, starting with his *Logical Investigations* and continuing through the *Ideas I* (GA 20:25/31; GA 14:95–99/76–79). Decades later, recalling his early teaching days, Heidegger still describes his own movement toward the Being-question specifically in terms of his efforts to understand “whence and how it is determined what must be experienced as ‘the things themselves’ *in accordance with the principle of phenomenology*” (GA 14:99/79), and says these efforts were made necessary by his realization that no matter how Husserl revises it, “consciousness and its objectivity” cannot characterize the “whence and how” of a phenomenological experience of the things themselves.
35. GA 56/57:109–110, author’s emphasis. Passages like these should give commentators pause before they start talking about the supposed



phenomenological “method” of which Heidegger gives a “foreconception [Vorbegriff]” in SZ. To be sure, he says, the Being-question must be “*phenomenological*. [But] that prescribes for this treatise neither a ‘standpoint’ nor a ‘direction,’ because phenomenology is not and cannot be either of these as long as it understands itself. The expression ‘phenomenology’ signifies primarily a *methodological concept*. It does not characterize the substantive What of the objects of philosophical research, but rather the *How* of this research. The more genuinely a methodological concept is worked out and the more comprehensively it determines the fundamental style [Duktus] of a science, the more primordially is it *rooted in the way we come to terms with the things themselves*” (SZ 27; cf. GA 20:183–87/135–37, my emphasis.). It is worth remembering, too, that foreconceptions are developed as *formal indications* not conceptual “technical devices, as in the theoretical disciplines” (GA 56/57:110). Phenomenological method is to Heidegger what dialogical method is to Socrates. There is no rule book.

36. This is why, when Husserl’s position is defined by what he says not what he does, SZ’s fundamental ontology tends to be interpreted as “a radicalization of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology,” not a departure from it (e.g., Stephen Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths toward Transcendental Phenomenology* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001], 130). Heidegger’s attempt to redirect discussion toward the “how” of philosophizing is aimed precisely against claims like Crowell’s, viz., that the distinction between living through life and thinking about it simply “*must* be seen as the difference between naive and reflective life” (146, my emphasis). For Heidegger, it is precisely this “must” that needs to be accounted for, and once understood, whatever it is about “how we are” that pushes this distinction, also shows itself to be an option, not a necessity.
37. GA 56/57:218–19/186. See Kisiel, GHBT, 21–25; and “*Kriegsnotsemester 1919: Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Breakthrough*,” in *The Question of Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Joseph J. Kockelmans*, ed. Timothy J. Stapleton (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 155–208.
38. GA 59:168–69/129. Note how little of Husserl’s own notion of constitution remains here. Dilthey’s sort of constitution—expressed as it is in “categories of life—‘comes out from’ life-experiencing-life” not from a transcendental ego, and thus “delineates and yet preserves an entity’s being” (following the Ancients’ sense of categorization) rather than making it an object identified in its essence for consciousness (GA 64:4 n./2 n.). Ultimately, the claim of Dilthey’s new psychology—that it is the “experience of mental life” that motivates any desire to consider the mental from the outside—raises the need for a “more radical investigation that makes [all] conceptions questionable,” but this, Dilthey does not consider (GA 59:166–68).
39. The English translates *Äußerung* as “utterance,” which is both too narrow and excessively “linguistic.” More importantly, it covers over the obvious reference to Dilthey, who called all externalizations of experience *Lebensäußerungen*.
40. On Windelband and Rickert, see De Mul, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 189–96. Cf. GA 56/57:166–68, 184–200; GA 20:20–22/17–18; and KL, 154–58/155–59. Regarding the latter reaction, Dilthey cites Lotze’s *Mikrokosmos* as an example of the way prior metaphysical (here, roughly, anti-Hegelian and mildly Leibnizian) commitments about what we *must* find when we study reality serve us no better than prior commitments to epistemological naturalism (GS 1:xvii/SW 1:49). In SZ Heidegger says he can to forego exposition of Dilthey on these issues, thanks to Georg Misch’s 1924 introduction to Dilthey’s GS 5 (SZ, 399 n.); but this should not be taken to express Heidegger’s



- own philosophical indebtedness. As Gadamer points out, Misch's introduction appeared only after Heidegger's interest in Dilthey had already peaked ("Martin Heidegger's One Path," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 22–23). Moreover, it is always risky to interpret Heidegger's view of Dilthey through Misch, given their fundamental disagreements about *Lebensphilosophie*. See, e.g., Claudius Strube, "Heidegger's erst Entgegnung auf die Kritik von Georg Misch," *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* 11 (1997–98): 173–200.
41. GS 1:xvii–xviii/50, my emphasis; cf. 84–86. "*Empirie, nicht Empirismus*," is a section subtitle of an 1880 draft on the epistemology and logic of the human sciences (GS 19:17). Classical empiricism, William James says somewhere, is not very empirical.
  42. SZ, 398, author's emphasis. This quote is from SZ, but the thought derives from much earlier work. Cf. KL, 154–58/155–59; GA 20:17, 116–19/19, 161–64.
  43. See, e.g., GA 56/57:164–65, my emphasis; also GA 59:166–68/128–29.
  44. SZ, 398, my emphasis. Unsurprisingly, however, under the reigning natural-scientific conditions of the times, once Dilthey declared life, experience, awareness, and expressivity to be "psychic" phenomena, his new psychology was bound to be condemned for abandoning the only truly objective (i.e., naturalistic) way to deal with mental events in favor of unconfirmable "descriptions" of what takes place "inside" conscious subjects. This deformation of the *Ideas* began almost immediately with a review by Hermann Ebbinghaus ("*Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie*")—which Husserl later admitted had excessively influenced him when he criticized Dilthey in the *Logos* article (*Phenomenological Psychology, Summer Semester, 1925*, trans John Scanlon [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977], 24–25). See also, de Mul, *Tragedy of Finitude*, 187–89.
  45. GA 20:19/17, my emphasis. Heidegger's claim—viz., that Yorck rightly made experienced life's *historicity*, not its *psychic structure*, its crucial feature and urged Dilthey to face the ontological implication of his work by "bring[ing] the 'ocular' and the 'historical' into a more originary unity" (SZ, 398, 403; GA *Supplements*, 177)—is all the more remarkable because Dilthey's GS 7, containing most of his late (and pointedly less psychological) descriptions of the system of human sciences, did not appear until 1926, when SZ was in press. Only two of the pieces in GS 7 appeared earlier, and Heidegger cites them both, in GA 59:156/120 and GA 20:64/118.
  46. Heidegger's letter to Engelbert Krebs, January 9, 1919 (*Supplements*, 69–70). See also, Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 102–4; and Thomas Sheehan, "Reading a Life," 71–77. Clearly, if Heidegger already has this radicalization of Dilthey in mind in 1916, Husserl's attempt to out-Descartes Descartes in the name of the West's scientific ideal is unlikely to have ever been the inspiration for the Daseinsanalysis (Kisiel, GHBT, 100–108.).
  47. GA 58:114–119/90–94, my emphasis. In KNS 1919, *KENNTNISNAHME* is already a name for this awareness, but it is still employed indiscriminately, as a feature of the awareness that can go along with any activity, theoretical or pre-theoretical, in a way that doesn't change or further conceptualize it. The idea is not yet specifically associated with the taking-note of experiencing as our basic "style" (GA 56/57:211/178). The technical use appears primarily in WS 1919–20 and WS 1920–21 (GA 60:12, 14–18/9–13). The translators of GA 60 unfortunately render "*die Kenntnissnahme*" as "taking cognizance



- of” and “*erkennende Erfahrung*” as “cognitive experiencing,” apparently missing Heidegger’s irony when he says he will have to consider this idea in detail, given philosophy’s reputation as “cognitive behavior [*erkennendes Verhalten*]” (GA 60:12/9).
48. GA 58:29/24. There are numerous remarks to this effect in the early lecture courses, all anticipating SZ’s idea that the being of Dasein is what is ontically nearest to it but ontologically farthest away (SZ, 15–16).
  49. GA 58:111/87–88. In this way, he says in a note, life shows its “horizon of expectation, which is always a new one; in experiencing it never encounters the same thing [*ein Gleiches*]; where it looks like it does, reifying objectification is already in place. . . . [The] environing world is thus vitally experienceable again and again, because life is ‘mightier’ than theoretical cognition and its concepts! No concepts, but rather something meaningful in some significant way [*bedeutungsmäßig Sinn*]” (111/216).
  50. GA 58:111/88; GA 59:171/131. Heidegger repeatedly employs the phrase, “contexts of meaningfulness” where Husserl would have referred to “regions,” in order to gain the double advantage of stressing the “lived unity” possessed by all such contexts, while at the same time avoiding the impression that contexts are always somehow “bounded” by something externally imposed on them. See next note.
  51. PIA, 351–52/114–15; see also. 55. Consider the subsequent reference in this passage to Aristotle’s famous remark about being as that which is said in many ways (*Met. Z*, 1003a, 33ff.). In 1922, Heidegger already regards “life” as what we live through (i.e., as “where” possibilities of meaning present themselves) not as Life, the knowable object. There is no “philosophy of life” in this space.
  52. It is important to remember how strong the influence of science-oriented neo-Kantianism was at this time, and how its philosophical ground rules forced the distortion that if Heidegger attacks the Kantian attempt to “ground metaphysics in *Erkenntnistheorie*,” this can only mean he wants to defend something like the reverse. Even Ernst Cassirer’s 1931 *Kant-Studien* review of Heidegger’s *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* shows that Heidegger’s decade-long attempt to develop a fundamental, ontologically oriented *Urwissenschaft* was still routinely misunderstood as a return to traditional metaphysics. Cassirer pointedly begins his review by citing Alois Riehl’s well-known Freiburg inaugural lecture, “*Über wissenschaftliche und nichtswissenschaftliche Philosophie*” (1883, republished in 1925), thus laying down a gauntlet that other less generous contemporaries used against Heidegger in cruder fashion. See Cassirer, “Remarks on Martin Heidegger’s Interpretation of Kant,” in *Kant: Disputed Questions*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Moltke S. Gram (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1984), 167–93; and Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 268–91.
  53. PIA, 355–56/117. See also, BH, 161, 439; and GHBT, 256–57, 507. I return to this issue shortly.
  54. GA 56/57:116–17/98–99; cf. PIA, 354–55, 364/116, 121–22; and SZ, 34–38. The point is spelled out in detail in SZ’s §32, where understanding is analyzed in terms of a fore-structure that always pre-informs Dasein’s factual situation as it comes to be interpreted. As discussed in Chapter 3, Descartes’ own *Meditations* are the best evidence that there is no Cartesian moment in which the mind draws a blank.
  55. GA 56/57:70–76/59–64; GA 58:25–64/21–50. Here is the “positive” origin of SZ’s notion of the at-hand-like worldliness of pre-theoretical life. It is formulated, not in “pragmatist” opposition to the “reality-” based



- conceptions derived from Descartes, but for the sake of spelling out the implications of Dilthey's idea that *all* expressions of life originate in immediate experience.
56. GA 61:85/65; also 81–82/62–63. Its ontological informality aside, “living” as described in the early lecture courses clearly anticipates “care” in SZ (e.g., PIA, 352–52/114–16), which clarifies how Heidegger understood Dilthey's being on the way to the question of life.
  57. For a brief period (mainly SS 1920), Heidegger called this assessment of the precise relation between an enacted context of meaning and the lived experience in which it originates a “phenomenological dijudication” (GA 59: 77–86/56–66; cf. GA 59:126/107). Although the label thankfully disappears as quickly as it was created, the idea that hermeneutic phenomenology always engages in this double movement of tracing expressions to their origin and monitoring the character of their enactment does not.
  58. There are, of course, many variations on this theme, e.g., interpreting a “first-person” perspective as accessing what “third person” thinkers ignore, embracing “subjective” over “objective” truth, imagining that instrumentalism or pragmatism is an answer to objectivism, cultivating the humanities instead of thinking like a scientist, becoming postmodern—the list is endless . . . and all the options, ultimately futile.
  59. Indeed, even Dilthey does this at first, by granting natural philosophy's right to simply take this route, admitting that the human sciences cannot base their research on “observation,” and then juxtaposing another kind of encounter with it. This point is obviously related to the distinction discussed earlier in connection with Nietzsche, viz., that between science as a practice and Science as a cultural phenomenon.
  60. The idea of sinking back down into environmental life in order to follow along as life expresses itself is Heidegger's first version of his many efforts to clarify the “hermeneutical situation of philosophy” that culminate in SZ (e.g., GA 61:3/4; GA 62:346–73/111–26; SZ, 231–33, 310–16, 396–97).
  61. GA 58:30–32/25–26; 41–42/33–34. As Kisiel notes, the notion of life's self-sufficiency survives into SZ, in Heidegger's observation that ordinary life does not require ontological analysis to be what it is, but any such analysis will necessarily arise out of it and initially speak its “language” (GHBT, 429–30).
  62. This point is connected with two other closely related aspects of Heidegger's early thought that I bypass here, viz., his development of the concept of intuition and critique of the “ocularity” of modern philosophical reflection. First, regarding intuition, in this same period when Heidegger is beginning to measure his debt to Husserl in the markedly paler images of “personal guidance” for a young student still ignorant of the “full diversity of phenomenological research,” he is everywhere extending and deepening his appreciation of “*Diltheyan* intuitions” (SZ 38 n.; cf. GA 20:157–74/114–26; also, Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “Heidegger's Critique of Husserl,” in *Reading Heidegger for the Start*, 231–44). The idea of “hermeneutical intuition” in KNS 1919 is a Diltheyan reinterpretation of Husserl's notion of categorical intuition in the *Logical Investigations*. Whatever Husserl himself may have thought of this notion (he later republished the *Investigations* only reluctantly and in part due to Heidegger's persistent requests), for Heidegger, its significance lies in the general implication that not all phenomenological “seeing”—i.e., intuition of the being of things—must be modeled on the sensual intuition of external objects (Kisiel, *Heidegger's Way of Thought*,



- 84–100). Thus second, for Heidegger Yorck's complaint that Dilthey does not sufficiently emphasize the difference his works expose between the existential-historical and the "ocular" supports his own rejection of the object-subject model in philosophy, because it distorts both what we find when we initially reflect on ordinary experience and what reflection itself is really like (SZ, 400, 402).
63. GA 63:85–87. Note, then, that in 1919–22 Heidegger is already closer to SZ's notion of "world" as our ultimate horizon of meaningfulness than to the traditional idea of world as an object whose presence is in need of proof.
  64. GS 5:90–138/SW 2:8–57. Heidegger asserts the importance of this essay as early as GA 59:155, 158/119, 121–22, but his main treatments of it come in GA 20:293–306/214–23 and SZ, 205–11.
  65. GA 20, §21:226–31/167–71. See Kisiel's gloss, GHBT, 502, 504, 506, 509; and BH, 440. *Selbstwelt* survives into SZ as the my-ownness (*Jemeinigkeit*) of existence.
  66. As I stress in Chapter 8, Heidegger worked out his conception of destructive retrieval very early and in a way that initially had nothing to do with twisting free of tradition and was not formulated for the specific purpose of a "destruction of the history of ontology." In SS 1920—the same semester in which KL calls for the first time for a "destruction" of Dilthey's philosophy—he gives it the more extensive role of recovering and tracing the assumed meanings of familiar objectifications back to factual life experience and thus, in general, makes it "an antidote to any and every tendency to lapse or 'fall' from originality into the 'surface existence' of everydayness" (GHBT, 117) Both Kisiel's GHBT and van Buren's *Rumor* have numerous citations for Heidegger's early discussions of *Destruktion* and *Abbau*.
  67. The rest of this paragraph and the next summarize GA 61:13–40/12–31. Other than noting that his initial conception of caring (*Sorge*) occurs here, I avoid any claims about Heidegger's philosophical development that rely solely on this text, because the GA volume is corrupted by the unacknowledged incorporation of numerous later emendations, some terminologically crucial. See GHBT, 235, 534–35 n. 5, and, Kisiel, "Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*: An International Scandal of Scholarship," *Philosophy Today* 39, no. 1 (1995): 3–15.
  68. Heidegger's is arguing that in what we might call today the "science vs. humanities" quarrel over the fate of philosophy, both sides are right in what they want to save and mistaken about how to save it. The basic problem for both sides is their misshapen conceptions of science—the former by making it the only model for genuine intelligibility, the latter, by insisting that science is necessarily out of touch with life. My guess is that regarding the first objection, Heidegger is thinking especially of Heinrich Rickert (see, e.g., KL, 157–58/158–59), and regarding the second, the philosophers of life, especially as they are sympathetically represented in Max Scheler, *Versuche einer Philosophie des Lebens, Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Neue Geist, 1919), 143–90, and unfairly criticized in Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens: Darstellung und Kritik der Philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920); see esp. GA 61:79–80/61–62.
  69. GA 61:84–130/64–85, esp. 88/66 and 114/85. In one place, Heidegger even alludes to a "phenomenological deduction or derivation" of life categories and cautions that they can only be understood "insofar as factual life itself is compelled (*gezwungen*) to interpretation" (87/66)—thus foreshadowing and shedding light on SZ's infamous remarks about the "violence" of



hermeneutic-phenomenological descriptions. As we have seen, Heidegger stresses from the very beginning that every retrieval moves “against” an inherited tendency to do the matter at hand insufficient justice.

70. For *Ruinanz*, see GA 61:140–55/104–115; for *Abfallen* and *Defluxus*, GA 60:199–201, 210–12, 272–73/146–48, 155–57, 205; also GHBT, 490, 507. Although KL sharply distinguishes between what Dilthey’s work is already contributing to the “question of life” and what his traditional self-understanding does to obstruct the way (KL, 158/159), it does not offer a notion like *Ruinanz* in terms of which to make the distinction. Dilthey does not seem to be a source for his ontological interpretation of this phenomenon.



## 8 Heidegger

### Being Historical and Taking Advantage of History

About Heidegger's early lecture courses, one thing should now be clear. The concern to investigate the "how" of philosophical thinking never loses its prominence. It is for the sake of this concern that Dilthey is important to him. Much has been written about Dilthey's supposed anticipation of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, but this perception of their relation is seriously misleading. Dilthey's substantive claims about human-historical life are not Heidegger's primary interest. To be sure, Dilthey's descriptions of human lives and human communities, his opinions about culture and faith and art, his theories about historical periods and social progress—all of this provides a fertile ground for Heidegger's early discussions of how it is with life, but how it is with life is itself important for him because *that* is where philosophy must return in order to become phenomenological. In other words, he looks to Dilthey above all for help with the question of how to be a phenomenological philosopher, and only secondarily for indications of what he might find when he becomes one, and what Heidegger finds especially promising in Dilthey is that, in spite of all the restiveness and lingering traditionalisms, his writings display a remarkable willingness to revise his conception of what he is doing whenever life as he finds it makes his current approach seem ill-prepared. Thus, as we have seen, Dilthey's descriptions of *Verstehen* change dramatically as methodological issues give way to questions about Life versus Nature, the psychic versus the historical, and about the philosophical implications of natural science being not just a rival but an expression of life. And with these changes in the idea of *Verstehen* come radical revisions in his description of the nature and maintenance of a standpoint of life.

Yet as much as Dilthey may help others pursue general philosophical questions of how it is with life and the understanding of it, his own motivation is never so general. Understanding life in its own terms remains for him a research-driven question, a question about how to "know," even if this means expanding the idea of knowledge to include two varieties. For Dilthey, starting from and within lived experience is always first of all perceived as the basis for one of those lines of life's possible "theoretical intensification" that Heidegger describes in WS 1919–20 (GA 58:120–128/94–100).



And the same is also true about Nietzsche, but in an importantly different way. Like Dilthey, he too wants to start from and speak for life itself in the name of a particular line of intensification, but, if we may put it this way, his motivation is existential not scientific. He is not interested in developing something like Dilthey's methodologically stabilized and circumscribed research region of Historical Life. Rather, Nietzsche struggles to become pre-theoretically attuned to the "burdensomeness" of his current situation, not to know it or understand it but to creatively live it.

Perhaps this is what the young Heidegger sees in Nietzsche's BT and UM2. But in any case, UM2's characterization of how the three histories might "belong" to us in an existentially advantageous way reveals something more about the "basic experience" of factual-historical life than we get from Dilthey alone. As we noted at the end of Chapter 5, in a late unpublished manuscript, Dilthey writes that "temporality" is human science's "first categorical determination and the one that is fundamental for all the others" (GS 7:192–93/SW 3:214–15). As I explain below, even from this short passage we can see that Dilthey's *Zeitlichkeit* bears a striking resemblance to the sense of temporality that silently structures Nietzsche's account of historical life in UM2. Yet as Dilthey presents it, temporality remains a categorical determination, that is, something human scientists need to know about when they do research. In Nietzsche, however, this temporality seems to be what structures a truly vital life. Here again, however, we have a potentially retrievable insight into how it is with life that its author displays but does not tell us about. It would appear that Dilthey's repeated efforts to reform the idea of *Verstehen*, and Nietzsche's running self-criticisms about his overstatements and hyperbolic tendencies have the same source. Both are "on the way to" the question of how life is, and I want to suggest in this final chapter that a double retrieval of what they show us but do not tell us about temporality puts us in a better position, not only to understand what Heidegger finally says about the historicity of factual life in SZ, but to draw a few conclusions of our own concerning how history matters to philosophy.

But first we must say something more about why Nietzsche is able to understand but not tell us about the temporality that is prefigured in his conception of taking advantage of the three histories. Not all destructive retrievals are alike, even if (as in this case) the matter to be retrieved is the same. To appreciate what Nietzsche, more than Dilthey, can contribute to the philosophical reconsideration of historical life being recommended in this book, we need to see more precisely why he does not tell us about it. And for this purpose, I need to say a little more about destructive retrievals.

## DESTRUCTIVELY RETRIEVING NIETZSCHE'S UNTIMELY MEDIATION II

In Chapter 6, I argued that Nietzsche's early analysis of how to take advantage of historical research without succumbing to cultural scientism displays



the same phenomenologically revisionist spirit as Dilthey's researches. Let me be clear. I am talking here primarily about how Nietzsche *presents* what he says and implies, not about *what* he says and implies. At least in UM2, even if not often elsewhere, his account of how the three histories belong to life appears to be grounded in a experienced sense of the temporally unified way in which life is there for us; and this sense seems quite different from the one conveyed by his accounts of Amor Fati, the Will to Power, and the Eternal Return—and different also from the one that informs the later sections of UM2 itself, where culture critique and philosophical polemics predominate, where the focus is on assessing the damage done by the “dark star” of scientism (§4), and where five successively degenerative forms of historiological-pedagogical sickness are identified (§§5–10). In these later sections, Nietzsche says very little about the potentially healthy lives we are losing, because he says so much more about what is currently poisoning them.<sup>1</sup> In the early sections, however, this emphasis is reversed. In §§1–3 the possibility of a vital, creative, youthful, adventurous, potentially extraordinary life is explicitly defended; its possibility is praised rather its loss lamented; and the significance of each history is identified positively, in terms of how its special association with one of the three phases of a lived temporal process functions when the three histories are used together. And all of this is presented as a characterization of what a vital existence can really (albeit infrequently) be like. Nietzsche is giving us a picture of actually living the healthy life, not just complaining about the widespread failure to achieve it. And his portrait of the healthy life is no romantic fantasy or idealized dream. He is Aristotle on the good life, not Plato. If we understand how it is possible, it becomes actualizable.

Moreover, there is a distinctive and unusual tone in much of Nietzsche's language in these early sections. For example, he does not describe the use of the three histories as brought together in acts of willing.<sup>2</sup> Nor does he depict the lived temporal process in terms of a juxtaposition of time and eternity—as he does perhaps most famously in an essay from the same period, “The Greek State,” where he calls “becoming” an “eternal self-contradiction in terms of time” and a condition of life in which “every moment devours the preceding one, every birth is the death of countless beings, [and] procreating, living, and murdering are all one.”<sup>3</sup> Quite in general, he turns away from critical opposition to scientism and scientific pedagogy, and away from polemics and deliberate metaphorical misuse of the traditional concept of time. Instead, he focuses on how the historical and the unhistorical “belong together,” and he describes how taking advantage of the three histories simply *happens* when both scientism and anti-scientism are subdued or fall away so that each history can productively affect how we perceive our lives and possibilities.<sup>4</sup> What Nietzsche appears to understand is that in those moments when one is neither doing historical research nor opposing it, it is possible develop a relationship with the human past that jointly “thematizes” each of the three aspects of a temporality that is lived rather than known and chosen. History as science thus gives way to history as



informing the course of our lives. In these decisive thematizing moments, the question is not what we are intellectually justified in affirming or asserting but what does it do to us—that is, to how “are” we—when we open ourselves up to the three histories?

Yet admittedly, this reading of UM2 purports to show that Nietzsche’s account depends on a sense of lived temporality that he not only fails to acknowledge but does not consistently carry through into his accounts of creative life in later work. Hence, the obvious objection to this reading: Have we not fallen prey to the old error of claiming to understand Nietzsche “better” than he understood himself, when we are actually just anachronistically reading our own preferences back into an author who did not have them? That this is not the case should be clear from our interpretations of Dilthey and Nietzsche in the last three chapters. They offer an alternative to *Beßerverstehen*. It is called destructive retrieval, and its purpose is to understand a philosopher further, not better. It is already in play in my treatment of Dilthey.<sup>5</sup> But let me elaborate.

A destructive retrieval works simultaneously from two angles. On the one hand, it distinguishes an author’s announced purpose and explicit claims from the foreconception (*Vorgriff*) that seems to be the largely unspoken source of the author’s urge to pursue this purpose and make explicit claims. A *Vorgriff* is not really a conception; it is more like an originary understanding or advance sense of what is to be taken up and articulated.<sup>6</sup> For Dilthey, initially, this foreconception is his sense that interpreting life in its own terms is not the same as explaining it. Later, as we have seen, this initial sense widens out to include numerous extra-methodological issues as well. For Nietzsche in UM2, what is foreconceived is the possibility of enacting a creative and authentic life out of “burdensome” present experience, that is, the possibility of “becoming what you are . . .” with the help of the three histories, once these are transformed from collections of information into a kind of poison that in small doses is health-giving.

On the other hand, a destructive retrieval identifies what it is about the author’s explicitly self-conceived orientation that makes it inadequate to the task of expressing what is foreconceived. (Consider, e.g., Natorp’s attempt to handle lived experience, while thinking of himself as a neo-Kantian who cares about “the subjective.”) In the case of both Dilthey and Nietzsche, their philosophical orientations tend to frustrate—indeed, even distort—their foreconceived concerns to speak “from” life about “knowing” and “enacting” it, respectively. In the case of Dilthey, the fact that he thinks of himself as an epistemologist of human science obscures the broader promise of radical philosophical revision implicit in his foreconception. And in Nietzsche, his stance as a culture critic and educational reformer tends to force the idea of “becoming” what you are into a polemical directive to rebelliously “will” what you are. Of course, many interpretations that are not destructive retrievals also start with something like the distinction between foreconception and explicit purpose; some even follow Heidegger in regarding



foreconceptions as incapable in principle of anything more than partial articulation. (Recall, for instance, Charles Taylor's remarks about how much of our lives involve starting with, and remaining beholden to, the "inarticulate end" of possible articulations of what we live through and already implicitly understand.)

However, three features of destructive retrieval distinguish it from its look-alikes. First, it is not a general procedure of interpretation to be used on just any interesting candidate. Its special concern is with those unusual cases and truly original authors, where it seems possible to detect a foreconception that is especially rich and responsive to what is presently burdensome and where, although it may be continually frustrated in its potential by an author's explicit convictions, these convictions fail to overpower it. Second, destruction and retrieval are not separate or sequentially arranged operations; they cannot be practiced except together. And because its purpose is gaining access to and furthering the promise of what is foreconceived, it cannot be primarily critical (i.e., bent on showing what is wrong with the author's explicit convictions) nor acquisitive (i.e., eager to simply take over "what" is foreconceived as if it were accessible entirely without its author's baggage). Instead, a destructive retrieval focuses precisely on the twofold way in which a promising foreconception is disclosed *as it also tends to be covered over by explicit convictions* whenever the author tries to give voice to it.<sup>7</sup> The idea is to interpret what is foreconceived in such a way that it might be clarified further through repeatedly revised explications that also counteract the obscuring effect of the explicit original convictions. Thus Dilthey the dedicated epistemologist of the human sciences keeps threatening to drown out the far less traditional voice of Dilthey the phenomenologist of historical life. What Heidegger tries to do is show how the stance of a traditional philosopher of science confuses methodological necessity with philosophical origination, so that he can distinguish more carefully between what is said about life when it is regionally motivated (e.g., considered part of observable Nature, or understandable History) and what can be said about experienced life itself as the basic "sphere of lived experience" from which all regional motivations emerge. Dilthey makes this interpretation possible by being a better phenomenologist in his practice than he is epistemologist in his philosophical self-conception.

But third, as Heidegger's treatment of Dilthey also shows, although it is important to recognize a destructive retrieval's double focus and see that it cannot be predominantly either critique or acquisition, it is more important to understand why this is so. There is no Maxim of All Maxims telling us to maintain an attitude of balance or interpretive neutrality. Nor is it just a matter of being fair to an author. Rather, destructive retrievals become an appropriate form of interpretation when the perceived richness and originality of someone's foreconception *resonates with one's own current sense of what is not finding a proper voice*. Dilthey does not address the larger philosophical questions his research discloses, and Nietzsche never asks directly about the



unorthodox but promising sense of lived time he displays in UM2. But we can do so ourselves, and profitably. After all, the prejudice in favor of objectification against which Dilthey struggled was no mere nineteenth-century problem, and the cultural scientism that appalled Nietzsche is now different but certainly not dead. I will come back to this question of the “motivation” of destructive retrievals, but let me first say something about why it makes sense to add a destructive retrieval of UM2 to Heidegger’s project of furthering Dilthey’s researches.

## WHAT NIETZSCHE UNDERSTANDS BUT CANNOT MAKE KNOWN

As with Dilthey’s researches, Nietzsche’s UM2 “contains” an original insight (about lived temporality)—one which never becomes a thesis but which is also neither contradicted nor made impossibly remote by his excessively orthodox presentation. As explained in Chapter 6, what Nietzsche actually says about the three histories is thoroughly grounded in this original insight, even when his exposition strays willfully and hyperbolically away from it. In other words, Nietzsche succeeds in *disclosing* how the three histories matter in a creative life by functioning together in the unified temporal order of anticipated future, inherited past, and critically experienced present. What *allows him to disclose this* is his insight that temporalizing in this manner constitutes what SZ calls “being historical.”

Present in UM2’s opening pages is not the Nietzsche who parlays cultural criticism into myths of the Eternal Return and the Will to Power. It is a Nietzsche whose own “historical sense” is more attuned to the living-through of life than to its “murder” by objective research. Instead of focusing on the deadening effect of thinking about one’s life like a scientist, he describes how life might be when we do not. We see this Nietzsche again in the last section of UM2 when, having catalogued history’s perversions in the more outrageous voice of his later works, he returns to consider the kind of “health” we can expect in those who take the right dose historiographical poison. He reverses Plato’s ahistorical image, according to which the first generation of youngsters raised in the ideal Republic will be intellectually lifted out of their imperfect surroundings, convinced by the “necessary lie” that they were fashioned by the gods and thus have no past to rebel against. On the contrary, says Nietzsche, we should raise a generation that overcomes precisely this Platonic disease. The real lie is the idea that we are at our best when we are ahistorically knowledgeable, which is the idea being fed to the present generation in the form of a scientific education. It must be “countered with a *necessary truth*: the truth that the German possesses no culture because his education provides no basis for one” (UM2, 328/119).

Nietzsche acknowledges that the experience of this truth may initially stimulate merely willful opposition to and cognitive misuse of what is being



taught (e.g., embraces of anti-positivism and positivism, respectively), but he leaves open the possibility that in its maturity even this generation will be less the opponents of historical knowledge and more the “hopeful” creators of culture who understand how to take advantage of such knowledge. Indeed, he describes UM2 as telling them “in a parable”

the course and progress of their cure, their delivery from the malady of history, and therewith their own history, up to the point at which they will be sufficiently healthy again to study history and, for the sake of the ends of life, to employ the past in its three senses. (UM2, 332/122)

To be sure, at the start of this post-Platonic era, part of the task is to cultivate a refusal of the objectivist mentality that hovers over the historical process and divides it according to the traditional idea of time into the part that has happened, the part now happening, and the part that hasn’t happened yet. To live creatively, we must stop thinking of history from above in this way (i.e., as if the living of it were as surveyable as a scientific mind objectifies it to be) and stand down from the outlook that encourages this interpretation. Otherwise we will mostly fall prey to the vitality destroying news that even the greatest accomplishments will someday be criticized and surpassed.<sup>8</sup> Given the power of this destructive idea—after all, it is both what historical science thinks and “what everyone knows”—it may well be that a

first generation of fighters and dragon-slayers will [have to] precede a happier and fairer culture and humanity without itself having more than a presentiment of this future happiness and beauty. This [first generation] youth will suffer from both the sickness and the antidotes: and nonetheless it will believe itself entitled to boast of a more robust health and in general a more natural nature than its predecessors, the cultivated “true men [*Männer*]” and [scientific] “greybeards” of the present. (UM2, 331/121)

To oppose historical scientism, Nietzsche’s first-generation youth may have to accept too much history. For it will of necessity start out from the historian’s own objective outlook (i.e., from where it is already situated), even if only to condemn it; hence, the *best* this generation can do may well be to “continually and eternally” say no to this outlook—to become, as Nietzsche says, “uncultured.” For in order to be a *mature* (thus maybe only a second) generation of youth, one must have more than this mere “presentiment” of the promised land.<sup>9</sup>

Yet even as Nietzsche admires and speaks the language of this first generation, he already understands what the next generation will see more clearly—namely, that the historian who wants to be all Reason and the youth who tries to be all Will both draw too weakly from life in its experienced



temporality.<sup>10</sup> The first generation may finally understand only that (objective) time can be “mastered,” because support can also be withdrawn from it. But a second generation will understand that the reason objective time is “unconquerable” is not because it is “endless” but because it remains “forever” a possible (but only *one* possible) mode of temporalizing. Which-ever generation finds itself no longer merely shocked by scientism will no longer feel the need to choose between science and life. Instead it will recognize that “life,” in its temporality, cannot be chosen but only accepted or obscured, and is in any case lived-through in some way or other. Thus, at bottom, UM2 is only “untimely” in its overt opposition to the hegemony of objective time; at the heart of its exposition lies a temporality that a stance of “eternal” opposition obscures.<sup>11</sup> The Nietzsche who engages in cultural critique, who rails against scientism and objectivism, who laments the educational imbalance between cognition and art, who rebels, who juxtaposes the unhistorical with the historical, who wants revenge against time—this is not the embodied, historically determinate, and much less tradition-dependent Nietzsche who speaks of “my instincts,” who keeps coming back to “the task,” and who understands how the three histories must somehow work together to invigorate his historical sense so that he become what he is.

In this latter voice, it is possible to discern the operation of Nietzsche’s unacknowledged, foreconceptual understanding of the sort of temporality one already lives through before that life falls under any science-life dualism. This Nietzsche pictures a generation that “will suffer from *both* the sickness *and* the antidotes *and* nonetheless . . . believe itself healthier and more natural than its predecessors.” And this Nietzsche is no mere culture critic or romantic anti-positivist.<sup>12</sup> Heidegger’s terms, we should ask “who” is this Nietzsche that already understands that “sickness” and “antidote” are conceptually excessive overstatements of two aspects of existential “health”? This Nietzsche is a potential a hermeneutical phenomenologist, someone who—at least foreconceptually—starts from within the concrete experiencing of a historical situation and directs us toward the idea of history as a science derived from it, rather than the other way around. And this, of course, is precisely what Heidegger himself proposes to show in SZ’s Division Two, Chapter 5, with the help of Nietzsche’s unspoken “understanding” and Dilthey’s “researches.”

## HEIDEGGER ON BEING INAUTHENTICALLY HISTORICAL

But why is a phenomenological account of lived temporality so difficult to give? The answer is not obvious, because the question is easily misunderstood. First, considering what we have said about the historical predicaments of Dilthey and Nietzsche, we might be tempted to blame their philosophical inheritance. After all, the Platonic lie about the ahistorical attitude being most appropriate to our nature is certainly alive in their immediate



predecessors, and it is their sense of knowledge and their educational ideals against which Dilthey and Nietzsche each struggle to make their way. Indeed, even into our own time it appears as if one “arrives at the present as already having-been” in roughly the same tradition. Even now, the same epistemological and ontological preferences are widely privileged in the name of “progress” toward an ever more “developed” world. After all, who wants to return to *supernaturalism* or have ideas that don’t mirror nature and don’t “work”? And if these loaded questions nevertheless seem somehow wrong to us in spite of their obviousness, what could be more appropriate than lurching toward postpositivism or postmodernism instead?

Given what Heidegger says in SZ about destroying Western metaphysics, many assume he supports the idea of blaming the tradition. In §6 of SZ’s introduction, he says, apropos the effect of tradition,

in its ordinary everyday way of being, which is from the beginning also historical, Dasein not only has the inclination to be caught up in the surrounding world so that it falls into interpreting itself in its reflected light; *at the same time it also falls in with a tradition that it has more or less explicitly taken up*. This tradition deprives Dasein of providing its own guidance in asking questions and making choices. This is especially true when it comes to . . . developing on ontological understanding of its ownmost being. (SZ, 21, my emphasis)

Doesn’t this say that, when it comes to phenomenologically depicting our involvement in the sheer living through of life, current common sense and modern philosophy are both toxic? Isn’t it our intellectual inheritance, both in its doctrines and even more as an attitude, that frustrates efforts at a truly “mindful noticing” of how it is with our basic experience? As Heidegger immediately adds, a tradition that becomes dominant the way Cartesianism has

makes what it “hands over” so little accessible that proximally and for the most part it is much more something concealed than accessible. Tradition takes what comes down to us and consigns it to obviousness; it hinders access to those original “sources” out of which our standard categories and concepts were once to some extent genuinely drawn. It makes us forget that these categories and concepts even had such an origin, and fosters the idea that the necessity of going back to it is scarcely understandable.<sup>13</sup>

Isn’t this precisely how the philosophically obvious sustains its power? Seventy-five years ago, for example, late Cartesian philosophers were proclaiming that good science requires no knowledge of its history. Even today, after Kuhn, many still regard questions about who does science and how it developed as irrelevant at best and a relativistic threat at worst. Shouldn’t



these out-of-touch displays of pre-Kuhnian traditionalism be blamed on our modern, Western, mathematics-loving, ahistorical, anti-speculative, science-obsessed, socio-politically instrumentalist inheritance?

This is not Heidegger's view. Neither of the two passages just quoted says anything critical about a *particular* tradition, let alone a specifically Cartesian one. Heidegger's topic is not *this* tradition; it is our being-in-a-tradition at all, where ours happens to be Cartesian. His point is that whatever one's inheritance, being-in-the-world means simultaneously "having" common sense and traditional theories, and tending to "fall into" the practice of defining who we are in accordance with them—even though the actual living-through of life is always pre-theoretically richer and less structured than any definition can capture. Of course Dilthey and Nietzsche, in their struggles to articulate their foreconceived senses of how it is with life, do indeed feel the specific press of positivism regarding science and pedagogy, respectively. But Heidegger's point is that neither of them is sufficiently mindful of "how it is" with this struggle itself, not that they fail to see what is wrong with Cartesianism. Indeed, they give insightful critiques of philosophical objectivism, but they still see nothing wrong in defending life's "subjectivity" and "instincts." In their lack of mindfulness, they do not see with sufficient clarity how their own projects tend to be "disclosed and regulated" in the form of "a past that does not merely follow along after" them "but . . . already goes ahead of" them in a way that frustrates their aims (SZ, 20).

This problem is ontological. One could only blame Dilthey and Nietzsche for being "caught up in a surrounding world and in a tradition and falling into interpreting their own being accordingly" if they had the option of avoiding this and failed to do so. But their own work actually includes in its foreconception the recognition that there is no such option. "Being *caught up* in a tradition" is part of being-historical, and Dilthey and Nietzsche deserve credit for directing us toward this issue in a way that Husserl cannot. Structured as his work is by a commitment to think of human life entirely in conscious-intentional terms, it downplays the very aspect of our being—its historicity—that is most in need of phenomenological treatment in a world full of Cartesians. Turned away from this phenomenon, Husserl neglects not only to make "the Being of the intentional" questionable but fails to raise "the question of Being as such," even though he implicitly makes the latter an issue by depicting phenomenology as facing a plurality of "ontological regions" but authorizing only one "transcendental-conscious" way of accessing all of them. Yet his neglect is not accidental oversight. Rather, it

manifests the history of our very Dasein—history not as the totality of public events but *as the very mode of happening of this Dasein*. That this neglect is possible and reigns in this way for thousands of years manifests a particular mode of the being of Dasein, a specific tendency toward . . . falling away from understanding, which Dasein does not



escape [but] *first really comes to its being when it rebels against this tendency.*<sup>14</sup>

I italicize the last part of this passage, in order to emphasize that it is precisely in their “rebellious” against the reigning conceptions of science and education that Dilthey and Nietzsche push us to consider being-historical, not as a topic but *as the very condition we are living through in the process of trying to inquire about it.*

Here, we find a second misunderstanding of why a phenomenology of temporality is difficult to carry out. Blaming a specific inheritance as if it were the cause of thinking unphenomenologically is one mistake. The other is imagining that our main problem is having an inadequate conception of human existence. Note that Heidegger rarely praises or criticizes thinkers simply for the views they hold. He typically moves on to instead to ask how they must understand things so that these views seem right to them, then identifies the “legitimate concern” in this understanding, and finally, vows to take this concern forward with him in the development of a more phenomenological account of how it is with lived experience such that it can include but is no longer dominated by the attitude expressed in this concern.

For example, Heidegger’s critique of Husserl emphasizes the lingering influence of the old dichotomy of experience and “consciousness” on his preconception of phenomenology, not the specific semi-Cartesian views he espouses on its basis—just as he criticizes Jaspers’ inadequate pre-understanding of existence as something “observable,” not merely the specific assertions he makes about existence on the basis of this pre-understanding in his *Psychologie*. Ultimately, Heidegger is less interested in complaining about Husserl’s inadequacies than in praising him for his “breakthrough into a new dimension of philosophizing . . . that consists in nothing less than radicalizing how we do philosophy [i.e., by] *bending it back into the hidden path of its authentic historical happening.*”<sup>15</sup> Of course, this is not what Husserl thinks he is doing. What he espouses is a phenomenological program that follows the traditional course of selecting a topic, identifying the appropriate way of treating it, and then giving a methodologically proper account of it. Yet in his struggle to carry out this program, Husserl *displays to us* his “breakthrough.” Our job is to take up this discovery and pursue the question of authentic historicity while simultaneously undermining the idea that this involves becoming a defender of the scientific ideal of philosophy who wishes only to reform its employment.

Precisely here, Dilthey and Nietzsche can help in a way that Husserl can’t. Unlike confident defenders of ideals, they both repeatedly express second thoughts about their own relation to their tradition and tend to see that tradition as not just frustrating but discouraging their projects. In them, in other words, philosophical self-awareness veers toward “rebelliousness.” *Each of them thinks he has good reason to continually reconsider who he is as a philosopher, lest his project be derailed by his own adherence to*



traditional habits. They display concern, in Heidegger's early language, for what motivation or attitude is suitable for their tasks, as well as an acute sense of inheriting the tools of an inhospitable tradition. In Dilthey, it eventually appears that life's standpoint must actually displace rather than merely supplement traditional philosophy's attitude toward science. And Nietzsche begins UM2 by flatly announcing that he is no spoiled "idler in the garden of knowledge"—no "scientifically educated" German—but rather someone who wants to see how historical science "belongs" to us as living beings. Throughout their work, *their way of carrying out their projects* remains in question. Without specifically focusing on what this means, they both display concern for "Who I am and how I am disposed toward" lived experience, such that in spite of what their inheritance urges them to say about it, their unorthodox descriptions of factual-historical life ring true. Hence it is possible, says Heidegger, to discern in their rebellious attitude toward tradition, not just a willful (and thus merely Cartesian) opposition but also signs of a phenomenological philosophy "coming into its own being."

To learn from this, we should take a destructive approach to their rebelliousness and retrieve their foreconceptions of *being-historical even as philosophers* that are embedded in their works: It now seems that being-historical is a condition with two features of movement working together. First, it is "how we already are" as motivations arise for us and get deliberately pursued. It is as *vital issues* that Dilthey seeks to understand life in its own terms and Nietzsche wants to address the burdensomeness of experience by taking advantage of historical science. Second, being-historical is *simultaneously* how we already are such that previously theorized motivations already tend to "fatefully determine" our initial style of interpreting these vital pursuits. Thus, by already "having" a traditional understanding of the nature of science, Dilthey continues to assume that even understanding life in its own terms must be somehow done scientifically, and Nietzsche furthers creative life by prescribing a scientific poison.<sup>16</sup> What a destructive retrieve does is focus *right at the place where they are living-through* this doubled historicity.<sup>17</sup> Its aim is to "bend back into . . . the historical life" where their foreconceptions originate without being either rebellious or Husserlian. What, then, do Dilthey and Nietzsche understand that allows them to be interpreters of historical life without either deconstructively obsessing over what obscures it or transcendently dreaming of apodictic visions of the pure process in itself? With such an understanding, they are on the way toward being "authentically historical."

The point bears repeating with a careful revision. To repeat: A genuinely phenomenological philosophy acts out of its acknowledgement of being-historical—that is, it "sinks back down into" environmental life and "follows along with" life's own movement toward theoretically intensified articulations, but without losing touch with the lived experience that motivates these intensifications. Here, in early 1920s language, is a Heideggerian description of philosophy just unproblematically *being* phenomenological.



Yet to revise: This is and always will be an idealized overstatement. Even the very best phenomenology will never cease *becoming* phenomenological, because to imagine phenomenology simply throwing off traditional impediments would be to imagine *not* being-historical. As we saw previously, the very source of the impediments Dilthey and Nietzsche confront is *life itself in its movement away from awareness of its own movement*. This is its characteristic “falling toward its everyday involvements and theoretical tendencies and interpreting its own being in their reflected light.” Even if phenomenology pledges to remain immanent to life, it remains just as subject to falling as the lived experience of which it takes note and with which it follows along. Again, in early language, “the movement of factual life which ‘actualizes’ and ‘is’ factual life *in itself, as itself, for itself, out of itself*, and, in all this, *against itself*”—this is life’s own characteristic movement (first four italicized phrases) which includes falling (fifth phrase) or what he calls here ruinance (*Ruinanz*).<sup>18</sup> Initially, Heidegger engages in some rebelliousness of his own—characterizing phenomenology as involving “counter-movement” or even “counter-ruinane” (132/99, 160/121). But starting in the mid-1920s, he stops identifying the problem as merely one issue among several, or describing it primarily in oppositional terms, or approaching it through a critical review of the history of mistaken accounts of it, and makes it characteristic of life itself. Thus being-historical means

always being how and “what” Dasein already was. Whether explicitly or not, it *is* its past. And not merely in the sense that its past, as it were, pushes itself along “behind” it, and that it has what is past as an objectively present property that sometimes has after-effects . . . but in the way of its own Being which on each occasion, to put it crudely, “historically occurs” out of its future. . . . *Its past does not follow along after Dasein but rather always already goes ahead of it.*<sup>19</sup>

Crudely put, maybe, but precisely on target: Our tradition-laden past already goes ahead of and comes back at us *from the future*. This explains why giving any phenomenological account, let alone an account of the very temporality of life itself, is so difficult. For anyone who wants to engage in such philosophizing, cultivating a mindfulness of how being-philosophical is a way of *being-historical* “*fallingly*” must remain co-extensive with its actual investigations.

## ON BEING AUTHENTICALLY HISTORICAL

In the passages from SZ cited at the beginning of the previous section, Heidegger makes two observations that are easy to misread as criticisms of a particular tradition but that we now see involve fundamental impediments to authentically (i.e., mindfully) being-historical at all. First, “tradition



deprives Dasein of providing its own guidance in asking questions and making choices”; and second, tradition makes the received interpretation of things so obvious that one forgets that its “categories and concepts even had an origin,” let alone that we need to go back to it (SZ, 20–21). These are not new ideas for Heidegger. He stresses the same two impediments in PIA. Contrasting his own approach with philosophies that think “actual” philosophy starts only after a “propaedeutic” furnishes “clear concepts” to guide us, he argues that a

philosophical hermeneutics of facticity necessarily establishes [*setzen*] itself within its factual situation, where life has already been interpreted and where this determinate, pregiven interpretation initially sustains philosophical hermeneutics and will never be entirely thrown off. . . . [Moreover, because] the tendency toward falling affects all interpretation, it is precisely “*what is self-evident*” in this pregiven interpretation . . . that will turn out to be what *inauthentically* . . . sustains its hegemonic power [*herrschende Wirkungskraft*] to influence the selection of problems and the direction of questioning.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, one of the self-evident ideas Heidegger has in mind is precisely the currently dominant idea that philosophy is actually able to take a distance from life and start with a propaedeutic. What “taking a distance” really amounts to is forcing the epistemic requirements of a specific theoretical intensification of life on all problems and questions, while suppressing its own status as a theoretical intensification (i.e., a variant of Cartesianism). Heidegger’s worry is that phenomenologists might become overconfident and forget that to some extent the tendency toward accepting this self-evident idea “will never entirely be thrown off.”

Heidegger’s descriptions of a phenomenological alternative—in which theoretical intensifications do not get to hide their lived-experiential origins, and philosophy actually tries to function in the midst of life—are present everywhere in the early lecture courses. However, because the issue of how philosophical hermeneutics might actually “establish” themselves in factual life does not get its fully systematic treatment until SZ, some might argue that the early writings should be read through SZ, not the other way around. The scholarly issues here are complicated,<sup>21</sup> but for my purposes, giving more attention to the early lectures and less to SZ has had two major benefits.

First, these lectures make it plain that Heidegger’s concern for grounding a genuinely phenomenological philosophy is not originally and therefore need not be exclusively interpreted as a means to end of raising his Being-question. From 1919 to the mid-1920s, Heidegger makes modern philosophy’s ahistorical ideal an issue in its own right, analyzes many of its effects on the received interpretations of ourselves and our surroundings, and only eventually comes to focus primarily on its relevance for raising the Being-question. That his grounding-question and the Being-question are closely



connected is undeniable. Perhaps Heidegger is even right that nothing short of the taking up the latter question can enable us to “think at the ending of metaphysics” or to ask whether “the world civilization just now beginning might someday overcome its technological-scientific-industrial character as the sole criterion of our journey through the world” (GA 14:75/60). Short of this, however, it remains an important task in its own right to ask about the “how” of philosophizing, in an age where being-historical continues to be widely interpreted as philosophically irrelevant or surmountable, and studying philosophy’s past, merely an acceptable option.

The second benefit to be gained by bringing the early lecture courses out from under the shadow of SZ follows directly from the first. As these lectures make plain, the initial problem for a philosophy that takes being-historical seriously is *how to become attuned to the fact of it*; and in the process of exploring this issue, the young Heidegger directs our attention to the very feature of SZ that is most important for my purposes and frequently gets the least attention. For all its hermeneutic insights and formally indicated lines of new research, the real point of SZ’s Daseinsanalysis is not to give us any better ontologies or solve traditional problems, but rather to alter our sense of how to philosophize so that we do not simply keep falling toward yet another version of the modern philosophy of consciousness. The Daseinsanalysis itself, as he used to say, *in the doing of it*, is supposed to “prepare” us as questioners; it is not a separate work whose results we will take advantage of later, as if it were propaedeutic for the real philosophy to come.

The trouble with SZ is that this intention, though stated, tends to get buried under the sheer bulk of the systematic analyses. In the early lecture courses, however, it is a prominent aspect of the general problem of becoming phenomenological. If to be at all is to be-historical, what could be a more pressing issue for philosophers who wish to remain phenomenologically “mindful” of life’s course, in a world where philosophy is already self-evidently ahistorical and philosophers become philosophers by reflectively stepping back from confusions of pre-theoretical life? I close, then, with a short review of what Dilthey and Nietzsche tell us about the temporality of this being-historical that Heidegger carries forward in SZ.

As noted at the end of Chapter 7, several passages in Dilthey’s late unpublished manuscripts provide imperfect preconceptions of SZ’s analysis of temporality. The most prescient is probably this one:

The first categorical determination of life, the one underlying all others, is temporality [*Zeitlichkeit*], which is already made plain in the phrase, “process of life.” Time [*Zeit*] is there for us in the collectively coherent unity of [even the most “elementary”] consciousness. Life and the external objects emerging within it share relationships of simultaneity, succession, interval, duration, change. From these, the mathematical natural sciences work out the abstract relations that, in Kant, are the basis for his doctrine of time’s phenomenality.<sup>22</sup>



This passage—which the young Heidegger probably did not see (it was first published in 1926) but which summarizes numerous discussions in other later essays that he did see—fairly bristles with proto-Heideggerian themes: It is in the “gathering unity of our [elementary, pre-theoretical] consciousness” that “time” is “*da*.” This “temporality” is contained (*enthalten*) in life itself, and this determination (*Bestimmung*) of life “is fundamental for all the others.” It is in terms of this temporality that we can understand both the essentially “relational” character of lived experience, as well as its “directionality” as a process. Moreover, the reference to lived time being the origin of Kant’s “abstracted” concepts of phenomenal nature reminds us that Dilthey is now (1910) assigning himself the philosophical task of differentiating not only the two kinds of science from each other but also both of them in terms of their shared “basis” in historical life. Finally, in saying temporality is a “category of life” and not a Kantian “concept,” Dilthey draws on numerous previous discussions of the differences between the two, in which he emphasizes the way life categories “stay close” to the lived-through sense of experience and “open us up” to it, whereas the point of theoretical concepts is to produce, if possible, generic universals which thereafter make further attention to the singularity of instances at best secondary.

It is impossible to read Heidegger’s early discussions of the “basic categories of life” without seeing Dilthey’s fingerprints everywhere (esp. GA 61:84–130/64–97, where factual life first becomes “caring”). Yet Heidegger does have a problem with Dilthey’s “ocular” way of characterizing lived time. As insightful as his descriptions are in identifying its features, they are *presented* as if life were being watchfully considered from the outside, not mindfully followed. Moments, process, directionality, the gathering unity of temporal phases and relations are all arrayed before us in a way that suggests we could first list them and only then consider their connections. Take, for example, the relationality (*zusammenhang*) of life’s experiences. How does one account for our understanding that experiences are all connected? Here especially, Heidegger insists we get our ontological priorities straight. Searching around for some principle of unity that first allows us to connect experiences has matters backward. The search only makes sense because we somehow *already understand* that “there is” experienced relationality which already “has” a unity that we might subsequently try, as one theoretical option, to conceptualize in terms of parts and wholes. The problem, says Heidegger, is that Dilthey does not tell us about this prior understanding. Instead he just starts naming features, in the typical modern philosophical fashion of privileging analytical parts over synthetic wholes. As usual, however, Heidegger’s response to this problem is a destructive retrieval. We must determine not just what sort of pre-understanding of relationality we actually have, but what keeps Dilthey from discussing it. And given what we have learned about life’s basic “tendency,” the question to ask is, how is he already conceptually intensifying lived experience, such



that his interpretations tend to fall away from acknowledging the “how” of life’s unified and directional temporalizing, and he ends up treating existence “as if it must pull itself together only subsequently out of its dispersion, and devise for itself a unity in which this ‘together’ is affirmed” for the first time (SZ, 390).

At issue, then, is not the just the proper description of being-historical but the proper way of presenting this description. Phenomenology, says Heidegger, must be conducted phenomenologically, and it seems that life is mostly not eager to help. Temporally speaking, as we already live forward, “our past comes back from the future as the ‘how’” of this existence (CT, GA 64:122/19). Thus, Dilthey’s tradition-laden past already sets him up “analytically” for any interpretations of the wholeness of anything, including an understanding of his own lived experience. Heidegger suggests that we are still in the same traditional atmosphere. Like Dilthey, we must face up to our own determinate tendency to do what “one” ordinarily does and think what has traditionally been thought, even when we, like Dilthey, have the strong sense that matters are otherwise. And regarding temporality specifically we must learn, says Heidegger, *how to be futural* (123/20). On this issue, Nietzsche’s UM2 offers more help, even if his account of lived time is not as well developed as Dilthey’s.

Recall that everything Nietzsche says in the opening sections of UM2 displays above all a concern for “how we go into the future.” This concern makes him different from “idlers in the garden of knowledge.” Moreover, this concern is driven by his understanding of how we arrive in the present as having-been, burdened by a past which *already gives signs of continuing to be so*. It is, as Heidegger says, already coming back at him from the future, burdensomely. Hence, it is “in the service of the future” of living persons in their struggle with this burdensomeness that the three histories are said to “belong” to them (UM2, 271/77, 258/67). All of this can be read as an affiliative but critical response to Dilthey. Whatever intrinsic value and satisfaction may come with historical research, however necessary it may be for this research to analyze human life into eras, centuries, cultures, practices, and so on, and in general however valuable it is to understand life as well as explain it, it is ultimately “from [burdensome] life” that *Historie* should be judged. To “start with knowledge,” even for the sake of determining how to live, might once have made sense in an ancient world that knew about *phronēsis*. In modern culture the idea of obtaining knowledge first and then “applying” it has a way of hiding life’s creative and transformative possibilities behind a deferential attitude toward knowledge that interprets it as propaedeutically setting the terms for what “one” should think and do (UM2, 257/67).

Here, we might say, is the power of ruinance or falling operating in a scientific culture. If the tradition that comes back at us from the future predisposes us to philosophically interpret ourselves as most human when we are seeking knowledge and obtaining power by using “objectively bounded”



rationality, then “how it is” with pre-theorized life can have no standing as a source of meaning, and any appeal to it will seem irrational and reactionary. Of course, this idea is rarely displayed so nakedly—a fact that undoubtedly enflames Nietzsche’s rhetoric more than occasionally. In any case, it is clearly the ruinous, cultural idealization of science that Nietzsche identifies as “the problem of our time” and the source of our experience of something “disconcerting, excessive, and disquieting [*unruhig*]”—namely, that “powerful, hostile star” of the cultural idea of Science that currently inserts itself between *Historie* and Life (UM2, 271/77). More precisely, it is not even the idealization of science itself that is the problem. It is the fact that we interpret ourselves and our futures in light of it. It is not scientific practice but scientific self-understanding that weakens individuals and destroys culture.

What is not so obvious in UM2, but what Nietzsche shows he understands there, is that for life to fight back, it must express its needs in accordance with, so to speak, its own time. We must speak “out of” the experienced temporality where the burdensomeness is already being lived through and is taking a definite shape. Heidegger’s own analysis of falling is obviously in play when he remarks that Nietzsche understands more about temporality than he makes known to us, and adds that the proper measure of history’s threefold advantage “for life” is not to be found in the “devised” unity of a principle imposed on the three histories after each is first analyzed for its separate contribution. Matters are, rather, the reverse:

*The threefold character of historiography is prefigured in the historicity of Dasein. At the same time, this historicity lets us understand in what way authentic historiography must be the concrete, factual unity of these three possibilities.”* (SZ, 396, author’s emphasis)

The idea of authentic *Historie*—that is, historical science interpreted in its proper form “for life”—is clearly foreconceived in UM2. Its treatment of the three histories actually displays this “concrete factual unity” in its depiction of how they operate “for the sake of the living person” when (monumental) inspiration, (antiquarian) reverence, and (critical) dissatisfaction work together in creative practice. The unifying source of this working-together is something about experienced life itself, specifically in this case as it informs UM2’s appeal to the “unhistorical,” and Nietzsche’s later repeated returns to his “instincts,” or feel for “the task,” or to second thoughts about previous polemical excesses. What all these phrases point back to is Nietzsche’s concern with his experience of the burden of inheritance.

Yet we should note carefully that even to interpret inheritance as a burden is possible only because Nietzsche understands *having-been* in terms of his *current* experience of its already having an effect on his experience of *futurity*. His concern, in other words, is structured by a sense of lived temporality that is very different from the traditional notion of time as the measure of movement. One can see how this affects his conception of



“becoming what you are.” Such becoming cannot be for him the activation of a natural essence—as if something already in place were now pushing him forward from behind toward future activity, in the way the ancients might have assumed.<sup>23</sup> One’s “[first] nature” is burdensome precisely because it is not natural. The place to look to find its power is not back toward something (“already”) essential that continues to affecting us “now,” but rather ahead toward the future, from which it already “discloses and regulates” our possibilities in ways not attuned to current “needs.” This is why Nietzsche gives monumental history—with its strong stress on futurity and its sharp display of contrast between the pedestrian and the extraordinary—priority. Examples of greatness can empower our sense that life need not be more of the same, but can be transformed in a struggle . . . against oneself.

Here Nietzsche strongly prefigures Heidegger’s description of the “how” of existence when historicity is authentically characterized:

Only a being that is characteristically *futural* in its being so that it can let itself be thrown back upon its factical “there,” . . . that is, only a being that, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of *having-been* can, by handing down its inherited possibility to itself, take over its own thrownness and be *in a moment of vision* for “its time.” Only [this] authentic, finite temporality enables something like fate, that is, authentic historicity, to be possible. (SZ 385)

Readers familiar with SZ will know how many questions arise once Heidegger presents this description of authentic temporality as, to put it in earlier terms, the mindful living in accordance with this threefold temporal sense of “how” it is to be-there. Indeed, I left one of them out in quoting, namely, Heidegger’s claim that it is anticipatory confrontation with one’s own death that first fully enables us to live through life with a genuine sense of its finitude, and only in this way do we get “thrown back” on our present experience in the way described. There is also the question of how individual fate (*Schicksal*) and communal destiny (*Geschick*) are related and allegedly function together as two “possibilities” of an authentic sense of historicity.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps above all, there is Heidegger’s failed prediction that clarifying Dasein’s temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) would somehow prepare us for considering the characteristic temporality (*Temporalität*) of being generally (SZ, 19).

Let me emphasize again, however, that although these *topics* have been addressed from many perspectives and for many purposes—some Heideggerian, some not—the prior question for Heidegger (and foreconceptually for Dilthey and Nietzsche also) is “who” are we such that particular perspectives and purposes can motivate our thinking but not necessarily in such a way that the fact of these motivations gets lost in theoretically carrying them out. When this question is left unasked, no matter how generous-minded an inquirer, *taking* a perspective *for* a purpose guarantees that whatever the



topic, it is no longer being disclosed phenomenologically but has already been assigned its place in a particular, theoretically intensified domain where “this sort of thing” is considered. Hermeneutically speaking, we can therefore say that both Dilthey and Nietzsche come too late to their topics, with too narrow a hold on lived experience to do full phenomenological justice to it. We cannot save historical life from one theoretically intensified treatment simply by creating another to lay alongside the established one. Nor can we reintroduce a concern for life simply by taking advantage of the results of an activity, when this activity actually obtains its results by “devivifying” their experiential character.

Here, then, is how the young Heidegger destructively retrieves Dilthey and Nietzsche. In a world in which many of the phenomena we directly experience seem everywhere interpreted “inauthentically”—that is, conceived in their “being” in reductive or disparaging ways, or even as if they are not “really” there at all—the first thing to notice is *one’s own inherited tendency to share in this practice*. To go directly to a defense of neglected experiential phenomena is to imagine that simply “having” something experientially is a powerful enough condition to allow us to cut through all the received impediments to interpreting it in its own terms. But in fact, it is our fundamental tendency *in that very experience* to have already pre-interpreted *everything* in ways that frustrate such defenses. In a world in which the point of philosophy is insure the proper representation of “what” something is, Heidegger witnessed the most dedicated phenomenologist wind up trying to let something be . . . by “determining” how it is for consciousness.

## PHILOSOPHIZING HISTORICALLY

In a certain sense, then, this chapter is a plea not to read Heidegger’s early lecture courses as juvenilia, as the old Heidegger wished. My interest, however, is not just better or less anachronistic scholarship but rather, as it was in earlier chapters, what we can learn from the authors covered about the “how” of philosophizing, and more specifically, about how history matters to its practice. In light of *this* issue, reading Heidegger backward seems ill advised. In fact, Heidegger himself shows that the question of how history matters to philosophy need not be linked to something like his *Denkweg*. Put in his own terms, how did Heidegger come to understand the “need” for a Daseinsanalysis, a destruction of metaphysics, and a repetition of the Being-question? A phenomenological philosophy, says the young Heidegger, must *be motivated from within life itself* (GA 58:27/23), and this is precisely what we see happening to his own philosophizing in the early lecture courses. They are a record of how Heidegger gradually comes to understand that no preliminary interpretation of how to study the sphere of lived experience and its theoretical intensifications, not even a phenomenological one, can immunize us against our tendency to interpret ourselves in light of



common worldly activities and to let inherited tradition over-determine our conceptions of how it is with life.

Phenomenology, says Heidegger, must prove itself through itself, that is, continually adjust its practice in the very process of mindfully following along with life and its intensifications, rather than define its practice *all at once* and in advance, so to speak, “propaedeutically.” I trust that my italics convey the contrast between a philosophical practice that knows itself to be “happening in a historical way” and one that divides its activities into a “before” phase of establishing rules of method and the “after” phase of abiding by them. Of course, in keeping with what the first sort of philosophical practitioner knows, we must add that no single recognition of this difference can last. As Heidegger notes in WS 1921–22 and again in SZ, common sense and traditional concepts and categories “ease” us into the future. There is always a strong initial sense of how it is with life that makes it seem more appropriate to do what “one” does and to think about everything as one “obviously” (i.e., already traditionally) does, rather than figure out how to resist or rebel, and indeed to continue to do so even when re-enacting the common or traditional is “ruinous.”<sup>25</sup> A nice illustration of this is Nietzsche’s “instinctively” placing monumental history before the other two. He promotes inspiration—that is, something to remind us that we have the power to have things otherwise—to block our otherwise continuously operative and pedestrian sense that everything will be just fine if we learn about it and then act according to how we are thus “educated” to act. But by his own account, to enact being-historical “authentically,” Nietzsche’s histories have to function *together*, in such a way that they are modifying each other. One does not first become inspired, then cultivate an appreciation of one’s roots, and finally develop a critical sense of what how all of this leaves us in a vitally unsatisfactory condition—as if in three separate “nows.”

I have presented the case that history matters to philosophy because we simply “are” historical. Philosophizing historically is not an option; one always already enacts this condition in any case, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the process of dogmatically asserting that one has stepped back from it. What is optional, however, is philosophizing historically as an “established” hermeneutical phenomenologist. By seeing *how* history matters to philosophy, we can conclude nothing about how life would be properly described and conceived. Nothing “normative” comes of simply recognizing historicity. It is always what comes to matter in the living through of life that determines its theoretical intensifications. Even the “motivation” for mindfully following along with life must come from life itself—as it does with Dilthey and Nietzsche. Together, as we have seen, the two of them help Heidegger see *how it is possible* to turn back and sink down into the experiential process of pre-theoretical life, to develop a way of formally indicating rather than conceptualizing its explicit lines of expression. Yet in their concern for understanding life in its own terms and living creatively in a world that manhandles such motivations, Dilthey and Nietzsche also



show him (and us?) *what might motivate* such a philosophy. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a possibility, not a required practice. It is perfectly possible to think of ourselves objectively, as located “in” history, just as we are also located “in” nature, or even to interpret the former is inside human bodies, with the latter being where those bodies are. It is also possible to take the information acquired by historical science and treat it in a variety of ways that Nietzsche wants to avoid. And it is also possible to interpret everything in the manner heretofore designated ahistorical. What goes largely unrecognized, however, is that all these options are possible only because all them (and countless others) are actually ways of “being historical” and of thus enacting what are not merely chosen intellectual options but intensified expressions of “how we are.” Living in a world where *this point* is obscured is what motivates a hermeneutic phenomenology.

## NOTES

- 1 “The oversaturation of an age with history seems to me to be hostile and dangerous to life in five respects: such an excess generates a contrast between inner [culture] and outer [practice] . . . that [1] weakens the personality; this leads an age to [2] imagine it possesses that rarest of virtues, justice, to a greater degree than any other age; this in turn [3] disrupts the instincts of a people, and hinders the individual no less than the whole [culture] in the attainment of maturity; this [4] implants the belief . . . in the old age of mankind, the belief that one is a latecomer and epigone, which [5] throws an age into a dangerous mood of self-irony and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism in which an increasingly clever egoistic practice paralyzes and at last destroys life’s vital powers” (UM2, 279/83).
2. Indeed, I believe a careful reading of UM2, §§2–3, will show that what little voluntarism may appear there is found in those passages in which Nietzsche has slipped from descriptions of advantageous use into criticisms of various forms of excess and misuse.
3. Published in the “Supplementary Materials,” in *Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 167.
4. Thus, Deleuze has it right when he argues that “We know what transmutation or transvaluation means for Nietzsche: not a change of values, but a *change in the element from which the value of values derives*” (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson [London: Continuum, 1983], 171, my emphasis). Relying, however, on works other than UM2, Deleuze quite naturally follows Heidegger’s later interpretation of Nietzsche in concluding that transvaluation constitutes a completion of nihilism that is affirmatively expressed in the Will to Power (172–75). In UM2, on the contrary, life—i.e., this “element”—comes into its own through taking advantage of the three histories for the sake of becoming—that is, creatively carrying forward and transforming, not merely reaffirming—what one already is. This cannot be comfortably depicted as sheer “affirmation” in Nietzsche’s later sense, let alone does it necessarily constitute some sort of existential “progress,” as Deleuze sometimes seems to imply, but it is certainly a kind of flourishing that only a historical being can accomplish. UM2’s non-voluntaristic description of this point is striking. It belongs more appropriately in the same general space



as Kierkegaard's "repetition," rather than in the Cartesian space of willing, affirming, and constituting.

5. In my view, though I cannot stop to argue the point here, destructive retrieval is one version of and was perhaps the main model for a hermeneutic (rather than Husserlian) phenomenology. Its most famous examples, of course, are SZ's hermeneutic of Dasein (where Dasein's existential-ontological features are retrieved from the ordinary and tradition-bound lives that simultaneously enact and hide them), and SZ's projected destruction of the Western metaphysical tradition (for the sake of retrieving the possibility of a "second beginning"). In any case, the approach was obviously not created exclusively for SZ.
6. In SZ *Vorgriff* becomes one of the three features of the much more carefully and systematically interpreted forestructure (*Vorstruktur*) of Dasein's situated understanding, along with a kind of advance having (*Vorhabe*) and previewing (*Vorsicht*) that discloses the surrounding world in its ontological sense (SZ, 151). In the early lecture courses, however, Heidegger uses *Vorgriff* alone and in a richer sense that more or less implies the other two feature (see GHBT, 508), but also in a less rigorously ontological sense, and on more than one occasion employs it when interpreting the phenomenological promise of other philosophers (e.g., in a review of Jaspers' *Psychology of Worldviews*, where his foreconception is said to be inadequate to handle his announced intentions! GA 9:7–10, 22–23, 36–43/7, 19–20, 32–37).
7. Think of the implications of this for Heidegger's attempt to think "at" the ending of metaphysics.
8. Here, Nietzsche praises what he problematically designates as a *superhistorical* attitude that allows us to turn our eyes away from the endless empirical fact of becoming to give us the youthful strength to see ourselves as freed from this process in order to break it up for our own purposes (UM2, 330/120, cf. 254–57/64–66). The admiration Nietzsche displays here for art (and at this time also for religion!) stems from their being inspired by ideals of eternal beauty and goodness—ideals they can have only if their eyes are *not* fixed on the historical process and our possibility of knowing it, where everything is "mere" contingency (and thus not "lasting").
9. UM2, 331/121. No wonder Nietzsche saves his most passionate condemnation for the cynic! From Nietzsche's assertion that the historian cannot cease to regard the process as a whole without abandoning knowledge itself, the cynic concludes that one cannot escape the process at all. Having spotted the emptiness of a merely nay-saying spirit of life, he finds Nietzsche's further descriptions of its kinship with art and religion unpersuasive. Somehow, Nietzsche says, one must "affirm the great but impossible" (UM2, 319/112). But if greatness (in the sense "forgetfully" believed in by one who attempts to do it) is ("known" in advance to be) impossible, then disregarding Nietzsche's obscure appeal to one's "feelings" of inspiration, the cynic simply tries to be more "honest."
10. Many of Nietzsche's critics (and even, with different tastes, some admirers) prefer simply to follow out his anti-scientific voluntarism and refuse to see anything more. Of course, once life is conceived exclusively as Will to Power, one is elevated to so high an altitude, that one can say of time only that—*no matter its contents*—what was, what is, and what will be are forever ("eternally") "willed."
11. Regarding the fact that UM2 is one of three "untimely" meditations, Löwith remarks that Nietzsche was "more of his own time than he desired to be, precisely because his stance toward it was polemical, untimely" (*From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 200). Nevertheless, this remains an overstatement,



- unless it is recognized to what degree Nietzsche's "desires" also express an "understanding" he could not adequately articulate.
12. The charge of romanticism and anti-positivism is perhaps most forcefully—and thus most clearly and incorrectly—leveled at Nietzsche by Habermas, who claims that Nietzsche's conception of science is approximately the same as Comte's (*Knowledge and Human Interests*, 290–300). Unlike Foucault, Habermas cannot see the presence of any proto-critical theory in him. But what is most important about his misinterpretation is its instrumentalist implication, viz., that if Nietzsche has a positivist conception of history is a "science," then we can only understand what he calls "taking advantage" of history as a kind of technology, applying historical-scientific theories about human history to present problematic practice.
  13. SZ, 21. On the phrase, "once to some extent genuinely drawn," cf. DD, where Heidegger says that even the interpretation of Dasein's own being "is ascertained by way of falling . . . where what was once created [*geschöpft*] and taken to heart [*zugeeignet*] falls into an ordinary understanding . . . that lives on in fixed propositions and rigid concepts. This fallen history of Dasein's being displays [even] itself in the history of the interpretations of its own being" (GA 64:102/87) In a marginal note, he adds, "thus *destruction* is constitutive in phenomenology."
  14. GA 20:179–80/129–30, my emphasis, and following Kisiel's inclusion of the reference to the "possibility and reign" of neglect from the Moser manuscript (129).
  15. From Heidegger's speech at the celebration of Husserl's seventieth birthday (BH, 419). I agree with Thomas Sheehan's suggestion that both Heidegger's praise and his going on to add that "those who want to transform must bear within themselves the power of a fidelity that knows how to preserve" are not exactly unqualified compliments (BH, 416, my emphasis). On Jaspers, see note 6 above.
  16. There is a long story here, to be told in another study. Some of Heidegger's early descriptions of the living-through of life attempt to be what we might call purely phenomenological, i.e., try to formally indicate how it is with life when depicted without interference from common sense or tradition (e.g., GA 56/57:116–17/98–99; GA 58:41–64/33–50). Here, I follow Heidegger's own later tendency to make all accounts of lived experience hermeneutically phenomenological, i.e., include acknowledgement of our tendency to fall away from any purely phenomenological awareness of how it is with life. It is no accident, I think, that even in the early lecture courses, his later tendency is already in evidence whenever his discussion is as explicitly concerned with how phenomenology is done as with actually doing it.
  17. Heidegger sometimes uses the device of repeating the same term in one descriptive phrase to highlight the relation between these two features, e.g., Husserl's "principle of all principles," the fact that "time is temporal" (GA 64:123–24/20–21), phenomenology's constituting the "science of sciences," or philosophy as "the experience of experience."
  18. GA 61:131/98. It is impossible to convey quickly all the resonances of "movement" (*Bewegtheit*). *Bewegen* can refer to bodily movement; being moved by something; moving in the right circles; to and fro as opposed to straight-line movement; but pointedly *not* movement involving external forces pushing at something from the outside. On *Ruinanz*, see Campbell, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Life*, 83–99.
  19. SZ, 20, emphasis altered. This is 1927 language, but the thought is already present in the 1920 Jaspers review: "The proper [*eigentlich*] experience of having-myself extends historically into the past of the 'I.' This past is not like



an appendage that the 'I' drags along with itself, but rather is experienced historically as the past of an 'I' *within a horizon of expectations already placed ahead of itself by itself* . . . . The phenomenological explication of how this enactment of experience accords with its fundamental historical sense is the most important task in the entire complex of problems relating to the phenomena of existence . . . [and] little is to be gained in this regard from an external account of the psychical that stresses the interaction of past and future states working together in 'consciousness'" (GA 9:31–31/27–28, my emphasis). See also BH, 114–15, 139–40.

20. GA 62:366–67/123, translation altered; cf. BH, 151–54, 167. In CT, Heidegger makes it "the first principle of all hermeneutics" that gaining access to history rests upon understanding "what it means to *be* historical," and in the end this means transforming the question "What is time?" into the question "Who is time?" (GA 64:123–25/20–22, author's emphasis).
21. Made more so by Heidegger's own later reluctance to include them in GA. See, e.g., Kisiel, *Heidegger's Way of Thought*, 136–48; GBHT, 311–314; and Van Buren, *Rumor*, 5–19.
22. GS 7:192–93/SW 3:214–15. And "the lived experience of time determines the content of our lives in all directions" (194/215). Cf., GS 7:72–73/SW 3:91–92; GS 6:315/SW 5:225–26; and Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 376–81, 431–34.
23. SZ, 20. My thanks to Dan Dahlstrom for urging me to fine-tune my description of how Nietzsche understands Pindar's famous line.
24. See GBHT, 497; BH, 434–35; Dahlstrom, *Heidegger Dictionary*, 96–98; and Otto Pöggeler, "Heidegger Today," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1970): 293–304.
25. SZ, 127–28; cf., GA 61:108–10/81–82. Heidegger cares primarily about making this point ontologically, but need we do so ourselves?



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## Concluding “Mindful” Remark

All of this of course raises an obvious question. If history matters to philosophy as I have explained, why have I remained silent about my own being-historical? Actually, I hope it will be obvious that HHMP itself is a response to this question, more or less in the form of a destructive retrieval. My selection of authors and topics, as well as the arrangement of their discussion, is designed to come to grips with at least one “burdensome” aspect of the philosophical inheritance I understand “us” in the “developed” world to possess—namely, the continuing pull of the idea that real philosophy’s relation to history is optional. For phenomenological reasons, however, I have no interest in debunking this idea. The point is to phenomenologically expose it as a dogmatic and origin-forgetting overextension of “science,” not just condemn it from a rival perspective that chooses to make history important.

Moreover, the legacy of Cartesian-like philosophy and scientism is only part of the problem. As I have explained, my destructive retrievals of Dilthey and Nietzsche are prompted, like Heidegger’s, by a sharp sense that they were both on the way toward grappling with a “problem of history” that has become much more pressing and far-reaching in our time. Perhaps, in a way, my treatment of Heidegger, too, is something of a destructive retrieval. To put it in mildly polemical terms, I do not read Heidegger primarily for *what* he says about this or that. Indeed, after almost 90 years it should be clear why no one has given us “the” account of Heidegger’s position or method in SZ. It is because SZ does not offer a position or method. Heidegger repeatedly calls SZ a preparatory work, but what he understands by preparation is not that when we finally get around to asking the Being-question, we should be well-equipped with a procedure and a system of existentialia. Rather he means that the hermeneutics of Dasein, *if one enacts it*, properly “places” us within historical-factual existence and informs our investigations through “an experiencing that . . . takes itself along as a hermeneutical intuition” of our currently lived-through situation (GA 56/57:117/99). By 1927, this proper placement becomes “authentic historicality,” which is SZ’s way of formally indicating in cumulative fashion both the results of Heidegger’s early investigations of being-historical and



his struggles to mindfully “take note” of this condition, in spite of our forever tending to interpretively “fall away” from it.

I leave it to others to decide whether this is good Heidegger or a destructive retrieval of him. In any case, I think we are still situated philosophically in more or less the same “scientific” era that Comte anticipated and Nietzsche describes in UM2. I therefore share the latter’s hermeneutic intuition about the Janus-faced character of such worldliness. Of course, since he wrote BT and UM2, life in advanced cultures has “moved” so that it now seems more appropriate to start by fully acknowledging rather than grudgingly accepting that science (and we should add, its associated technologies) is a genuine and unsurpassable “culmination” of the dominant Western intellectual tradition. In this respect, Comte was right about the third stage and its consummatory character. At the same time, however, the glaringly obvious price being paid for “having” this consummation is far worse than the “cultural” price Nietzsche identified. Hence, although I share Nietzsche’s hermeneutic intuition (in a necessarily somewhat updated form), I do not share his philosophical “attitude” about it. We need, I think, to work out very different “counter-ruinous” ways of going into our future—ways that reflect neither optimistic Comtean anticipation of ever more of the same in ever-better circumstances nor Nietzsche’s defiant idea that life must square off against historical knowledge as a (sometimes, albeit in small doses, health-giving) poison.

I see some promise for dealing with this burdensome hermeneutic situation in Heidegger’s later idea of “*working out a free relation* with technology.” The two italicized ideas are clearly “repetitions.” In 1953 as much as in 1919, his concern is to *place his thinking* within the sphere of lived experience—that is, within our vital understanding—such that our *responses* to the burdensomeness of this condition will be neither unknowing variations on the familiar and the self-evident, nor rebellious reactions expressed in negative versions of traditional ideas. Of course it goes without saying that about our own, specific, happily-pragmatic-but-deeply-disturbing twenty-first-century circumstances, Heidegger himself could have nothing directly to say, especially not about what “motivations” we may find in life that call for new “intensifications.” But *that this so*—namely, that we are determinately in the midst of things and capable of “taking note and following along with this” without immediately playing theoretical favorites—is certainly clarified by Heidegger’s formally indicative explorations of our historicity.



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